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NATURE VIA NURTURE

How nurture turns on nature

SESAME WORKSHOP

Early childhood educational initiative

OUR TOXIC WORLD

Graphic guide to hazardous substances in everyday life

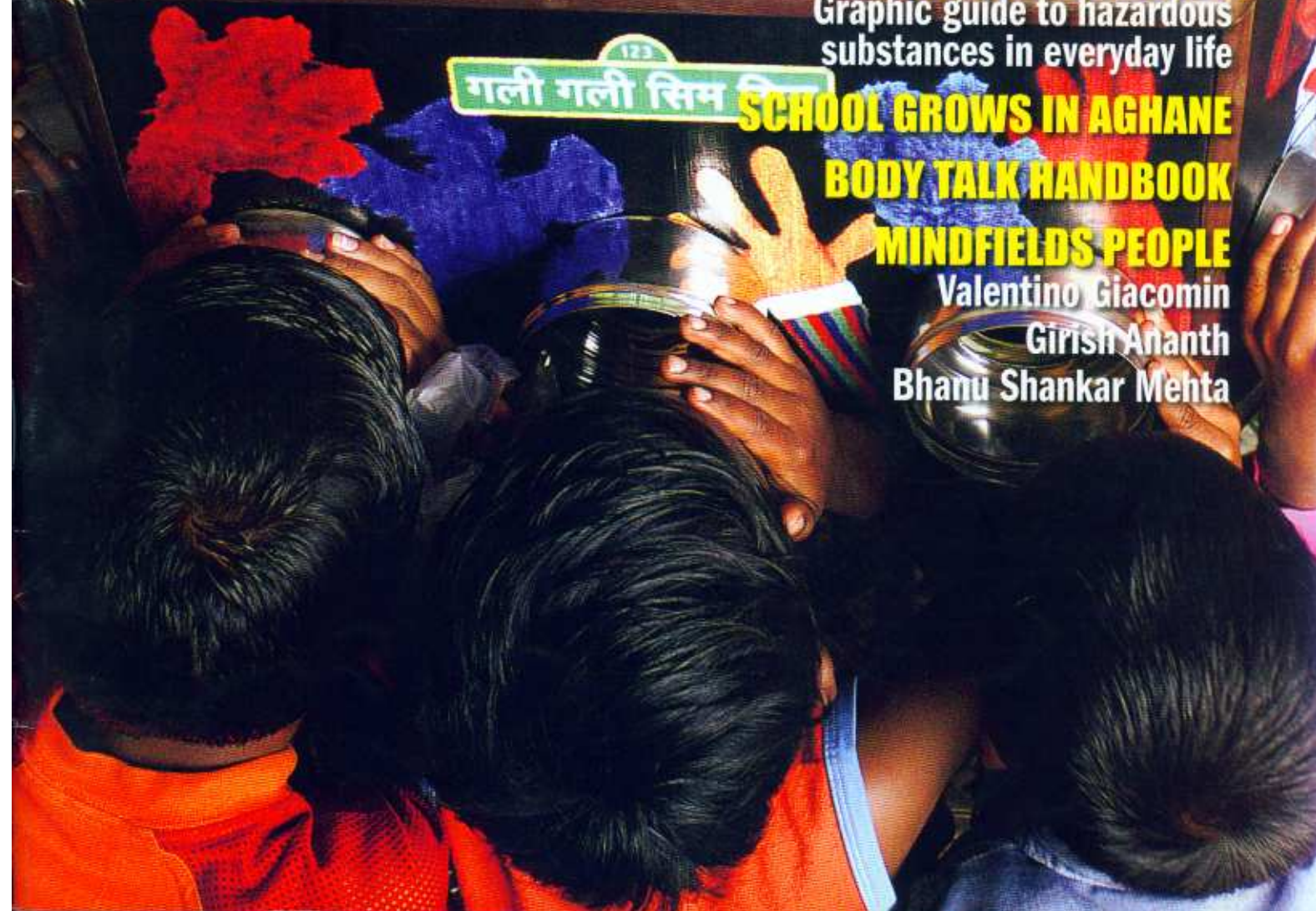
SCHOOL GROWS IN AGHANE

BODY TALK HANDBOOK

MINDFIELDS PEOPLE

Valentino Giacomini
Girish Ananth
Bhanu Shankar Mehta

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Issue II 2010

**WORLDLY WISE**

Nature Via Nurture

*How nurture activates nature***Page 06****EDUCATOR**

Valentino Giacomini

*Blending curriculum seamlessly with the life and inner landscape of the children***Page 12****OPINION**

Raising the Bar

*The true measure of a school is the intellectual ability of its students***Page 20****TEACHERS WHO TEACH, NOT TELL**

Girish Ananth

*About the need to teach biology so that children can value life***Page 24****EXCLUSIVE**

Galli Galli Sim Sim

*Sesame Workshop's early childhood learning initiative***Page 28****FIRST PERSON**

Pragya Alekal

*On experiencing a gurukul-style education***Page 34****ENTERPRISING OCTOGENARIAN**

Dr Bhanu Shankar Mehta

*Pathologist-playwright-author-social activist***Page 42****EDITOR'S NOTE** Page 02**SUBSCRIPTION FORM** Page 03**OUTREACH** Page 38

A School Grows in Aghane

CHOICES Page 40

Exploring the art of choosing

SEX EDUCATION Page 46

Informative book aimed at teenaged Indian girls

BOOKS Page 48The Hippocampus:
Good Reading Guide**NEWSBYTES** Page 50**END NOTE** Page 52Hari Batti reviews
'Our Toxic World'**MINDFIELDS TEAM**Amruta Patil, Luke Raokip, Aravinda A.,
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Aravinda A., Ameena Batada**INPUTS AND EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE**

Selena George

Cover photo: Courtesy Galli Galli Sim Sim

EDITOR'S NOTE



Matt Ridley, author of the bestseller 'Genome', says that not only are nature and nurture not mutually exclusive, but that genes are designed to take their cue from nurture. Featured in this issue is the 'Nature versus nurture' debate - one of the most heated themes of debate in academia.

Mindfields continues to explore the fibre of our lives - environment and personal spaces, spirituality and secularity, entertainment and education. Carrying on our love affair with people of hyphenated job descriptions, we profile 89-year-old pathologist-playwright-social activist Bhanu Shankar Mehta and ornithologist-polyglot-science teacher Girish Ananth. Also featured is a conversation with Anjali Wason, author of a new handbook that addresses young Indian girls' questions about body image, reproductive health, relationships, sexual abuse, safety and responsibility. It is a book that no school or parent in today's world ought to shy from bringing into a tweenager/teenager's bookshelf.

Amruta Patil

Luke Haokip

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- Do you have an anecdote about an insightful, heartwarming interaction with a student or child?

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We will be happy to have your suggestions and contributions translate into interviews, features, comic strips in our future issues.

Contributors will receive a honorarium and a free year-long subscription to mindfields.



how Nurture turns on Nature

NATURE AND NURTURE ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE AND GENES ARE DESIGNED TO TAKE THEIR CUE FROM NURTURE. ALL BEHAVIOR IS THE PRODUCT OF AN INEXTRICABLE INTERACTION BETWEEN HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT DURING DEVELOPMENT

Text: Luke Haakip
Illustrations: Amruta Patil

Nature versus nurture is one of academia's most hotly debated topics. According to Mar Ridley, author of the best selling "Nature via Nurture," both nature and nurture are important, in fact they complement each other. Without nature there is no basis or raw material for nurture to work and nurture cannot take place without the underlying genes that enable it. To simplify it, 'nature' here concerns an individual's innate qualities (read genes) and 'nurture' the personal learning experiences through the learning environment.

One view is that learning plays only a supportive role in the development of the child – that it is mainly a process of maturation or growing up. The other view is that learning determines the entire course of a child's future.

It started off by with the consideration that nature was ultimate. This was when Darwinism came into its fore in the UK in the late 1800s. Then in the 1960s, views towards a 'tabula rasa' or a blank slate were being favoured – that environmental factors such as education, experience or nutrition, shaped a person's intelligence and character.

According to Steven Pinker, Johnstone Family Professor in the department of psychology at Harvard University, "during much of the twentieth century, a common position in this debate was to deny that human nature existed at all."

He feels that part of the blank slate appeal came from the realization that major differences between ethnic groups and different classes of people that were earlier attributed to innate temperaments and talents disappeared when people immigrated to another land and culture or became more socially mobile.

The zeitgeist favours a balance between nature and nurture. Both genetics and environment are considered to play important roles in the development of a child. This according to Ridley is the interactionist; no longer are we concerned about nature versus nurture, he is convinced it is nature via nurture. He points out that just as genes can influence human behaviour, human behaviour can in turn influence genes, and this discovery has recast the debate entirely towards an understanding

that given the right environment, nature can now be nurtured.; that genes are designed to take their cues from nurture. The common misconception is that genes determine our behaviour entirely, instead our behaviour can alter the genes course too.

GENES AT WORK

Ridley says if there were just 33 genes in just two permutations, on and off, it is enough to make every one in the world unique. There are over 10 billion ways you can go if you switch on or off each of these 33 genes – and we are talking about 30,000 genes here.

The genome, or the complete set of genes or genetic material in the body, is not a blueprint. Rather it is like a recipe that can be manipulated. Genes control heredity but it is the environment that

determines their expression. It is our genes that enable us to learn and not because we are genetically programmed to. Genes allow the human mind to "learn, to remember, to imitate, to imprint, to absorb culture, and to express instincts," states Ridley.

Like when writing a book one needs not invent new words, you could use the same words in an existing lexicon or even the same set of words used by a particular book. All you need to do is change the sequence of words to mean and say different things – and you have a new book. In the same way genes in the body, depending on the sequence they are in, make the crucial difference in determining how one person may turn out – different from the other.

A COMMON POSITION ON NATURE AND NURTURE AMONG CONTEMPORARY SCIENTISTS

"No one today believes that the mind is a blank slate...all behavior is the product of an inextricable interaction between heredity and environment during development, so the answer to all nature-nurture questions is 'some of each'."

Moreover, modern biology has made the very distinction between nature and nurture obsolete. Since a given set of genes can have different effects in different environments, there may always be an environment in which a supposed effect of the genes can be reversed or canceled; therefore the genes impose no significant constraints on behavior.

Indeed, genes are expressed in response to environmental signals, so it is meaningless to try to distinguish genes and environments; doing so only gets in the way of productive research."

THE ZEITGEIST FAVOURS A BALANCE BETWEEN NATURE AND NURTURE. BOTH GENETICS AND ENVIRONMENT ARE CONSIDERED TO PLAY IMPORTANT ROLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD.

This changing of sequence happens by the switching on or off of sequences of genes. The switching of genes is done by small stretches of DNA called promoters. There are hundreds of these in the body. They turn on or off different genes to cause the production of a particular protein. But depending on the sequence and timing the same, proteins could create different kind of beings, for example a human being or a chimpanzee. Some genes, therefore, are influenced by promoters and others by our environment.

Genes are not merely the carriers of heredity but are active during life, switching each other on and off. They respond to the environment; they determine how the brain and the body are formed in the womb



"PROFESSORS ARE INCLINED TO ATTRIBUTE THE INTELLIGENCE OF THEIR CHILDREN TO NATURE, AND THE INTELLIGENCE OF THEIR STUDENTS TO NURTURE." *ROGER MASTERS*

but once the child is born they set about dismantling and rebuilding in response to the environment. Ridley points out, "they are both the cause and consequence of our actions."

Nature and nurture are not hostile to each other. In fact they are harmonious collaborators. This collaboration of nature and nurture along with the action of DNA promoters can create species as diverse as yeast and the blue whale. In the same way in human beings this collaborative effort can create an amazing diversity of individuals racially.

"Genes, unlike gods, are conditional. They are exquisitely good at simple if-then logic: if in a certain

environment, then they develop in a certain way," says Ridley. He suspects that science has so far greatly underestimated the number of gene sets that act in this way - conditioning their output to external conditions.

Genes are the epitome of sensitivity because of which creatures can be flexible and be the very servants of experience. For example it makes good evolutionary sense for us to be, instinctively, afraid of snakes; and to learn how to fear them the hard way or 'by experience' would be disastrous. Yet there are experiments with monkeys that reveal that they must acquire their fear of snakes by watching other monkeys react with fear to snakes. This is probably how

even humans learn to fear snakes. On the other hand it turns out that it is very difficult to teach monkeys to fear flowers. According to Ridley, "what we inherit is not a fear of snakes but a predisposition to learn a fear of snakes; a nature for a certain kind of nurture."

NATURE AND NURTURE AT WORK TOGETHER

Men instinctively look to seek success in the areas of intellect, wealth or position even if their primary object is to be successful with women and they learn this within their culture. This is nurture reinforcing nature, not opposing it. To this effect Ridley says culture will often reflect human nature rather than affect it. In one study, Jennifer

THE MORE EQUAL WE MAKE SOCIETY, THE HIGHER HERITABILITY WILL BE, AND THE MORE GENES WILL MATTER. IT IS NOW KNOWN THAT TWINS REARED APART WOULD TURN OUT NOT JUST AS SIMILAR, BUT MAYBE MORE SIMILAR THAN TWINS REARED TOGETHER.

Connellan gave 102 24-hour-old babies two things to look at: her own face, or a physical-mechanical mobile of approximately the same size and shape as a face. The baby boys slightly preferred to look at the mobile; the baby girls preferred the face only slightly. So it is nurture largely that will go on to create preferences and biases.

Social Scientist Roger Masters once famously said, "Professors are inclined to attribute the intelligence of their children to nature, and the intelligence of their students to nurture." There is a bit of truth in that saying because one does assume that one's qualities good or bad are inherited by our children. If we look at heritability, it is actually a measure of what is varying, not what is determining.

In a true meritocracy, where all have equal opportunity and equal training, the best athletes will be the ones with the best genes: heritability of athletic ability will approach 100%. In the opposite kind of society, where only privileged few get sufficient food and the chance to train, background and opportunity will determine who wins the races - heritability will be zero.

Paradoxically, therefore, the more equal we make society, the higher heritability will be, and the more genes will matter. It is now known that twins reared apart would turn out not just as similar, but maybe more similar than twins reared together. In the same family, differences might become exaggerated. Twins who were

separated early in life, have more similarities than twins separated at a later age.

The 'environment' is not some inflexible and unreal thing: it is a unique set of influences actively chosen for or by the person himself. Having a certain set of genes predisposes a person to experience a certain environment. The genes are likely to affect appetite more than aptitude. They do not make you intelligent; they make you more likely to enjoy learning. Because you enjoy it, you spend more time doing it and you grow cleverer. Nature can only act via nurture. The environment acts as a multiplier of small genetic differences, pushing sporty children towards the sports that reward them, and pushing bright children towards the books that reward them.

GENES MATTER

Genes matter more than shared eating habits. Personality is about as heritable as body weight. The correlation between siblings in weight is 34%. The similarity between parents and children is a little lower, at 26%. Identical twins reared in the same family have a correlation of 80% while fraternal twins reared together have only 43% similarity.

The correlation between adoptees and their adoptive parents is only 4%, and between unrelated siblings in the same family it is just 1%. By contrast, identical twins reared apart in different families are still 72% similar in weight. By adulthood, intelligence is like personality: mostly inherited, partly influenced by factors unique to the individual and very little affected by the family you grew up in. This is a counter-intuitive discovery exploding the old idea that genes come early and nurture late.

Today nutrition, education or mental stimulation is making each new generation's IQ better than its parents and therefore, according to some nutritionists the role of genes must be smaller. But the analogy of height proves this is non sequitur. Better nutrition ensures each generation is taller than its parents, but nobody would argue that height is therefore less genetic than was thought. In fact, because more people now reach their full potential stature, the heritability in height is probably increasing more now than ever before.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

The belief that nurture is more compliant than nature relies partly on the fallacy that nurture is what happens after birth and nature is what happens before birth. If the influence of the environment is partly prenatal, then the environment begins to sound a lot less like a malleable force and more like fate.

In 1989, a medical scientist named David Barker analysed the life of more than 5,600 men born between 1911 and 1930 in six districts of Hertfordshire in southern England. Those who had weighed the least at birth and at one year old went on to have the highest death rate from Ischaemic heart disease. The risk of death was nearly three times as great in the light babies as in the heavy babies.

Barker has gone on to confirm the same result in data from other parts of the world for heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Using the 'thrifty phenotype' hypothesis, which is a result of this kind of work, Barker has found an adaptation that has come about due to famine - that a malnourished baby's body is imprinted with its prenatal experience; the body is in a way expecting to live in a state of food



**"FRIGHTFUL AND PAINFULLY DISAGREEABLY HUMAN,"
QUEEN VICTORIA SEEMS TO HAVE REMARKED ON
SEEING AN ORANGUTAN IN A ZOO. (CIRCA 1843)**

So which are we, similar to apes or different from apes? According to the book, both. About 40 years of field primatology have confirmed that humans are a unique species, completely unlike any other. There is no exact parallel to the human scheme. But in the animal kingdom, there is nothing exceptional in being unique. Every species is unique. Anthropologists like to recount the limitless diversity of behaviours in human cultures, but there is no human culture so extreme that it even begins to compare to the social system of either the chimpanzee or the gorilla.

deprivation through out its life. Its whole metabolism is geared to being small, hoarding calories and avoiding excessive exercise. When, instead, the baby finds itself in a time of plenty, it compensates by growing fast but in such a way as to put a strain on its heart.

This bizarre second-generation effect is hard to explain with the phenotype hypothesis, though it has also been observed that locusts take several generations to switch from the shy, solitary form with a specialist diet to the swarming, gregarious form with a generalist diet, then go back to what it was all over again. If it takes several generations for humans to switch between thrifty and affluent phenotypes (affluent phenotype being the opposite effect of thrifty phenotype), this may explain why Finland has nearly four times the death rate from heart disease as France. The people of Finland lived in comparative poverty until 50 years ago. Perhaps it is the first two generations to experience abundance who suffer from heart disease.

Even language does not just develop according to a genetic programme. Nor is it just absorbed from the outside world. Instead it is imprinted. It is a temporary innate ability to learn by experience from the environment, a natural instinct for acquiring nurture. Polarise that into either nature or nurture, if you can. Biology is the science of exceptions, not rules.

NOTES ON NURTURE

Judith Rich Harris wrote a sensational article in the celebrated *Psychological Review* – and in 1997, on the strength of that article alone was given one of the top awards in psychology (the George Miller Award). The article demolished parental determinism in favour of an alternative that she propounded.

IF YOU EXAMINE A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE, YOU WILL FIND EACH INDIVIDUAL PLAYING A CONSISTENTLY DIFFERENT ROLE. YOU'LL FIND AMONG THEM A TOUGH, A WIT, A BRAIN, A LEADER, A SCHEMER, A BEAUTY... THESE ROLES ARE CREATED, OF COURSE, BY NATURE VIA NURTURE.

According to Harris the environment as well as the genome, has great influence on the personality of a child – but mainly through the peer group. Children are not apprentice adults nor do they see themselves as such. Ridley commenting on this matter says, that children are trying to be good at being children, "which means finding a niche within groups of peers – conforming, but also differentiating themselves; competing, but also collaborating."

Pinker observes, "Though children are not prewired with cultural skills, they also are not indiscriminately shaped by their environment. One aspect of human nature directs children to figure out what is valued in their peer group—the social milieu in which they will eventually compete for status and mates—rather than to surrender to their parents' attempts to shape them."

Children get their language and their accents largely from their peers, not their parents; most think it is peer pressure that pushes the young towards conformity. To conform is indeed a feature of human society and in people of all ages, but there is something else going on beneath the surface. The conformity is almost superficial compared to the frantic search for individual differentiation.

Harris is of the same school of thought as anthropologist Sarah Hrdy who believes that ancestral human beings raised their children in groups in a what is known today as cooperative breeding. The child's natural habitat therefore was nursery

of children of all ages which then got self segregated by sex for much of the time and according to Ridley, this is where we should look for our cues for the environmental causes of personality.

If you examine a group of young people, you will find each individual playing a consistently different role. You'll find among them a tough, a wit, a brain, a leader, a schemer, a beauty... These roles are created, of course by nature via nurture.

Each of them will soon realise what she or he is good at compared to others in the group. She then trains for that role and not for others. This is true within families as well as in school classes and street gangs. Apparently this tendency to differentiate first emerges about the age of eight.

Questions are raised about whether the peer culture trickles down from adults. Whether it originates from high status individual or groups and proliferates down peer networks. There are practical implications of the new understanding of how children socialise themselves. For example smoking and drinking among teens is a status symbol in peer groups and it is best addressed by understanding how these activities become status symbols rather than insisting the parents to talk more to them. Pinker observes, "A major determinant of success in school might be whether classes fission into peer groups with different status criteria, in particular whether success in school is treated as admirable or as a sign of selling out."

Every job interview is in a way about genetic discrimination. No one goes for qualifications and experience alone – otherwise, why hold an interview at all? What is being looked out for is something intrinsic in the person, rather than some acquired talent.

The more one is prepared to make allowances for a deprived background, the more of a genetic determinist one is. Besides, the other point of the interview is to take into consideration personality, and recalling the lesson of twin studies; personality is even more strongly heritable in this society than intelligence. One of the first of many Promethean dilemmas for the new century is that social policy has to adapt to a world in which everybody is different.

Instead of a steady progress towards enlightenment, the 20th century became a collision of ideas, a hundred years war between the forces of nature and the forces of nurture and success for nature could only mean defeat for nurture, and vice versa.

But the more you discover genes that influence behaviour, the more you find that they work through nurture, and the more you find that animals learn, the more you discover that learning works through genes. Nature versus Nurture is dead. Nature via Nurture, according to Ridley is what we must look at to find the answers. ■

Much of the article draws its inspiration content and ideas from "Nature Via Nurture" by Matt Ridley. Dr Matt Ridley is the author of 'Nature and Nurture,' the international best-seller 'Genome.' His books have been translated into 23 languages and have been short-listed for six literary prizes. He lives near Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK with his wife Dr. Anya Hurlbert and their two children.

At the Heart of All Things, Emptiness

Valentino Giacomini has set up schools for underprivileged children in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Arunachal Pradesh - whose curriculum blends seamlessly with the life and inner landscape of the children.

Text and Photos: Anurita Patil

This has been an early and restless summer. In nearby Varanasi, the watermark of the Ganga is low. And Sarnath's stark, beautiful Buddhist ruins are not swarming with tourists and pilgrims. The tree-fringed and spotlessly clean courtyard of the school is a refreshing change. It is swept as part of the morning routine of the students who live on campus. The residential students also tend a kitchen garden, grow their own potatoes, and make their own meals.

The school in Sarnath

The courtyard is lined with prayer flags - some inscribed in Italian, some in Tibetan, some in Hindi. There is a stupa in the middle. There is a wall where images of Laxmi, Buddha and Jesus sit in peaceable conclave. Children learn prayers from ten different religions - this 'inter-faith' school aims at fostering tolerance, obviating radicalism. Morning begins with a goat kid that wanders into the heart of the school assembly and brings the house down. Though it is orderly, there is an unselfconscious warmth about the place, a palpable lack of tension. "Ciao, Sir!" children in the corridor call out to Valentino - Italian is one of the foreign languages taught in this school, the only concession to the 'foreign' origins of the school founders.

My apprehensions about meeting a



Valentino lends a patient ear to a student's concern



Sweeping the courtyard is a morning routine

Westerner running a school for underprivileged children in rural Uttar Pradesh are quickly laid to a rest. Valentino Giacomini is as Gandhian as they come. He has few material possessions, no time for small talk, and deals with the scorching heat and absence of creature comforts with more equanimity than most of my friends in Delhi ever could. I have been forewarned that he doesn't suffer fools. It is soon obvious that the peppery, matter-of-fact facade conceals great thoughtfulness. A boy

who looks distracted in class is intuitively diagnosed as being faint with hunger - there was no food in his home - and is served up a quick breakfast without fuss or fanfare. When he speaks, Valentino dives right into the heart of the conversation. We do not talk about his and Luigina's continued struggle to find funds for the school, the number of times they've dipped into personal resource, or the dismissive attitude occasionally meted out by visa-issuing authorities. ("Who needs white social worker types?") These details are gleaned from the passing conversations of others. Valentino is only interested in talking about the big picture.

Early years as a teacher

Born on 27th April 1944 in the North Italian village of Zero Blanco, Valentino was one of six siblings born in a farmer's family. "I was lucky to be born poor," says Giacomini about his childhood, "it ensures you aren't spoiled. There can be two responses (to being poor). The first is - I'll become rich and enjoy myself. The other is - I know how this feels, so when I have money, I'll use it to help others."

Valentino credits his mother, a devout Christian, with having given the siblings an unshakeable moral education. "It gave me a sense of direction, of doing what was right, of being socially involved."

The decision to be a teacher was made early on. "At the age of sixteen, I went to Treviso to study to become a teacher.

In those days, you could decide soon after junior high school what kind of career you wanted to follow, and you



Prayer flags in various languages

Going beyond Cognition-Shunyata



Students meditating during morning assembly...

After years of observing banches of children come and go through his class, Valentino and some of his colleagues came upon an important realization. "Every year, our students seemed to be more difficult than the ones we had in class the year before - more behavioural problems, less attention spans. Did we need to change our mode of teaching, make the education more child-centered?"

They came to the conclusion that, the problem, in fact did not lie in how the children were taught, but in something deeper. "The behaviour of children is, after all, only the symptom of the disease. And the disease was not scholastic in nature it seemed to be

existential. The food we were giving them was not the food they needed! Their behaviour, their lack of attention - this was an unconscious response to the teaching and stimulation they did not need."

Valentino recognized some of that dissatisfaction in his own boyhood. Though his school experience was generally a good one, in retrospect, he could see that it was missing some grounding, some stillness, something like meditation practice. "We were too involved in only the cognitive aspect - study, study, study." Perhaps the children in his own classroom were missing the same sense of grounding. Valentino toyed with this thought,



until, at the age of thirty, a chance encounter in a hospital crystallized his intuition. "I saw a man who was about to die – his breath had become irregular, you knew he was about to go. I had a sudden sense of how completely alone that man was at that moment. I remember thinking – 'What can help a man at this stage?' Oddly, it was the word 'yoga' that entered his mind. Up until that time in his life, Valentino knew nothing about Yoga, or for that matter, about Hindu or Buddhist philosophy. "When I left the hospital, the first magazine I set my eyes on had an article in about 'Yoga for the Dying'."

He was determined to find out more, and made his way to a Buddhist centre in a nearby town. "An old teacher there spoke for three days about different kinds of sufferings and hells." For an

enquiring young mind raised in Western tradition, what he heard and saw was undeniably alien. He could barely check his skepticism. "I came from a tradition where there's just one hell – this talk (about multiple hells) made me laugh. I remember complaining to someone there about the teaching – "What is this man talking about?" A monk came and said to me, just look at your mind. There was sudden dawning of light. I realized that the old teacher was not talking about anything in the outside world. They were not talking about external hells – it was on a level of consciousness. As soon as I realized that, it was a turning point. I realized that everything comes from the mind."

"Ask even a scientist and he will confess that we don't understand more than 2% of our universe. 98% of the universe is unknown. We don't really understand how the human mind works either. But we do know that everything comes from the mind. And if it is true that the mind controls everything – then what happens to you if you can't control your mind? You are lost! You end up being controlled by external phenomena, by your teachers, by a mind you do not even understand! What can you possibly expect in this situation but disaster?"

This was the springboard for Valentino's spiritual path, as well as his educational philosophy - to create an equilibrium between study and spiritual practice.

"Buddhism gave me a chance to understand the concept of what Hindus call maya and Buddhists call shunyata - emptiness. The concept of 'emptiness' made a huge difference to me as a person, and to me as a teacher. I wanted to bring this concept into the curriculum of schools."

"I never let go of a chance to try out something innovative in the class," smiles Valentino. But nonetheless, when he and some other teachers started incubating ideas in the school in Italy, it was, in Valentino's words, 'very discreet, not a big revolution'. The aim was to shake the foundation, get children to break the habit of knowing and to rethink everything. So we started this off as a research project in an elementary school. I tried to integrate the core ideas of Buddhism, the psychology, in my way of teaching.

learned the relevant subjects. The teacher training studies lasted five years. We had pedagogy, literature for children, teaching methods for primary school, and drawing – everything that you need. For the last two years, we were supposed to go to a primary school and teach."

Is it a good idea for a person who is but a teenager himself to start training to be a teacher? Doesn't a teacher need to be trained to be more than a teacher? What of further education – the B.Sc, M.Sc, B.Ed, that one assumes a qualified science teacher ought have? Valentino's response is emphatic, "To be a good science

teacher, you don't need to know everything about science - you need to know how to teach! This is extremely difficult. I think it's better to be a bit ignorant, but have the skill of teaching."

It was during his teaching career that Valentino met Luigina de Biasi - also a teacher like himself, and the dynamic public face of the Alice Project. The two would go on to form a working partnership that would continue through the years, across continents. In his off-school hours, Valentino worked as a journalist for North East, a weekly news magazine. Later, he would take a brief sabbatical to work





fulltime in the media (TV news, radio, as well as print journalism) – but the love affair with education would be an enduring one.

A Fragmented View

"Our education system is built on separation, on classification. In primary school, we tell the children, Look at the tree. The tree is divided into three parts – roots, trunk, leaves. First act of separation. Later, in middle school, there are further classifications and labels for different parts, and the 'tree' disappears."

He continues, 'But we stop and ask – is it really true that the tree is divided into three parts? Who decided that the tree is divided into three parts? Is this objective knowledge or subjective knowledge? Or was it just that one day in the 17th century, some botanist took a pen in hand, drew a tree, wrote a name, wrote that the tree was divided into three parts – and the idea came to existence. And you tell the children, this is the truth, go memorize it, if you don't memorize it, you will fail your exam. But this is not the complete truth about the tree – it is only a concept, a 'scholastic truth'. The real tree is not 'divided'.

According to Valentino, conventional knowledge is poison. It is the big missing in our fragmented 'truth' that creates a problem. It is not true that the tree is divided into three parts.

What is true is that we project what is in our mind. What is true is that our senses are extremely limited. "When the foundation of things is fragmented knowledge, what can we expect from the learners? Right motivation? Right behaviour? Right action? Not at all!"

The practice of teaching subjects in a disconnected way further magnifies the fragmentation. "The science teacher says, If there is any problem with the kids, it isn't my problem, I'm just the science teacher. I say to the teacher, you teach a student how to think. 'How to think' is where emotions come from. From emotions rise motivation, and motivation is where action comes from. You are the first ring in the cognitive chain! And you think you are just the science teacher!"

We want to shape the progression of knowledge we share with the students and how we share it. I ask the science teacher, what percentage of the universe do you know about. He cannot say more than "2%". And this means that 98% of the universe is unknown – in that case, are you not ashamed of standing in front of a class and asking them to keep silent and listen to you?

So we don't know anything about 98% of the universe.

And we don't really know how the human mind works either. But we do know that everything comes from the mind. And if it is true that the mind controls everything, if you cannot understand or control your mind – you are lost!

You end up being controlled by external phenomena, you're controlled by a teacher who knows more Math and Science than you, you are controlled by your own mind which

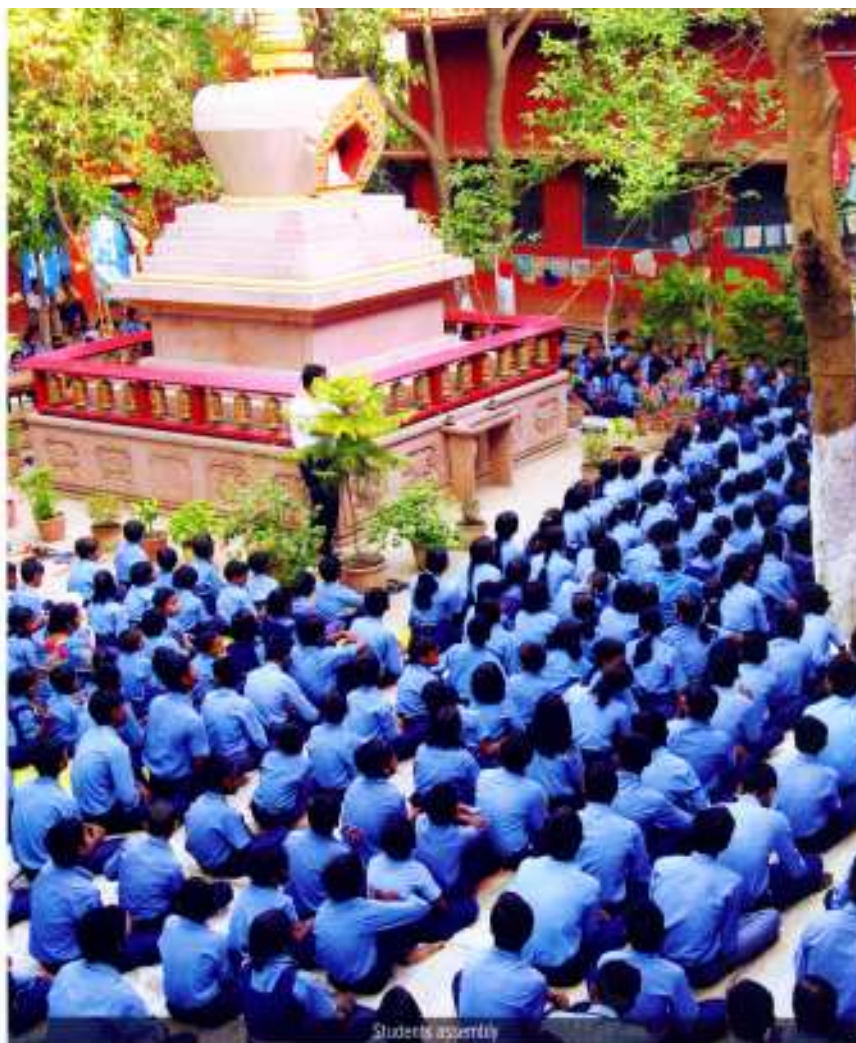
you do not understand. What can you possibly expect in this situation but disaster."

Schools, Secularism

What does he make of the new suspicion that educational institutions regard matters of faith with? People are questioning the need or place for spiritual matters in school and making claims of being secular – is it a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water?

Valentino, a practicing Buddhist who increasingly reacknowledges his Christian upbringing and values (in reflection of the Universal Education theme, and in reflection of the wall where images of Laxmi, Jesus and Buddha sit in confluence!), is quick to respond to this. "In a time of emergency, it is essential for children to know the workings of their mind, to know that there is a place inside them that is pure that they can hold onto, to have a spiritual grounding. When people say they are 'secular', they are insulting the culture of this country. What they mean by 'we are secular' is, 'secularism is our religion'. Vehemently refusing religions is a religion in itself. Why, even science itself is a religion – because it gives you a vision with which to perceive all phenomena! What secularism means is





Students assembly

to respect all religions, not to deny them all. Europe established this model (of viewing spirituality as the nemesis of progress) that India is unfortunately trying to emulate. We rarely acknowledge the tremendous problems Western countries are now facing because of their obsession with material culture."

"I never use the word 'religion'. I use the word spirituality, which has nothing to do with individual cultures - it is in the realm of 'superculture'. Religion, usually, is about morality, about doing good, being good. And the concept of shunyata has nothing to do with 'do good' and 'be good'. It is a unified way of knowing, a very holistic view of the world. What we are trying to do here has nothing to do with religion. We make students aware of the mind," he continues. "If everything around us is the perception and construct of the mind, then let us study the mind! Not just how to use the mind, but how to

understand the working of it. There is nothing that I am saying to you now that cannot be proved scientifically. What I teach here is something that can be taught to a Christian, to a Hindu, to a Buddhist."

Journey into Wonderland

At the age of fifty, after a rich, multi-faceted career Valentino left Italy, bought a piece of land in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, and built a school to realize a dream. It was during an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1988 that HH suggested that Valentino come to India and work in the domain of education. "I had been to India before, but the thought of staying and working here was something I had never thought of." After thinking of various possible places where the school could be started, he chose Sarnath as his base. Sarnath, the very place where the historical Buddha gave his very first discourse. Between intent and

realization of the plan stood a mountain of red tape, small-town politics and intrigues and local goons. A veritable obstacle course followed (including outrageous allegations of Valentino being part of the Italian mafia!) and, miraculously, dissipated. In 1994, the Alice Project Universal Education School came into being.

'Alice' in the school's name refers to none other than the heroine of Lewis Carroll's classic, 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. To Valentino, she embodied the sort of solitary, courageous journey that we all need to embark on so we can do justice to the business of learning, living, and dying mindfully.

In Carroll's tale, Alice is bored with the dense, picture-less book she is reading, and very sleepy. Then she musters the courage to enter Wonderland - a place 'inside' - and embark on a great adventure. Alice enters Wonderland alone - a potentially risky thing to do - but she is fortunate to find an inner guide (in the form of the White Rabbit). "We all need to do what Alice did," says Valentino, "but in a more protected way." We need to guide students through both realities - the reality of boring books, and the reality of their inner lives."

According to the school's website, "The methods used tap the most powerful potential we possess - the potential to be wise and kind." Easier said than done. To translate abstractions into living reality, Valentino left no stone unturned. While core subjects for higher classes (Math, Science, Social Studies and Language) adhere to the syllabus prescribed by the State

Government, the children also learn ancient Indian disciplines such as yoga, meditation, ayurvedic medicine and massage; and what Valentino refers to as 'integrated universal branches of learning' (encompassing everything from dance and drama to ecology, mythology, ethical teaching, farming and philosophy). To teach the latter, Valentino set about the gargantuan task of creating original – a series of textbooks, teaching manuals, moral tales and stories that are used through the school years as a springboard for discussion, and for the exploration of ideas of self and reality. Each book is profusely illustrated, painstakingly bound and produced. "Visuals are very important" explains Giacomini, "because philosophical concepts are hard to get."

Valentino explains that children are encouraged to speak about their emotions from a very early age at this school – an uncommon thing. Our conversation is interrupted by Manish, a boy of around eleven in a spanking new blue school uniform. He is one of four boys of a lower caste community that looks after funeral pyres at the burning ghats of Varanasi. He hangs around the staffroom because he has yet to fit into a peer group. Before he came here, Manish spent all day hanging around burning pyres, poking at embers, sifting bones and ash to retrieve bits of metal and valuables – until he was brought to school, that is. Keeping the boys within the embrace of the school is a challenge. One of boys who came here with Manish ran away, back to the freewheeling life by the burning ghats (at the time that this magazine went to press - Valentino informed me that the boy came back a little later, apologizing for his mistake). It is life stories like Manish's that make Valentino's books strike such a chord with their readers. Take 'Ranjeet and His Stories', for example which has even been turned into a school play. In it, a young lad named Ranjeet is the junior high school's guide through moral stories that deal with forgiveness, concentration, social



Original textbooks, teaching manuals, moral tales and stories created at Alice Project

injustices. What makes that so interesting? The fact that the characters resemble the children in the school. The landscapes are familiar, the social problems ring true, the emotional preoccupations are their own – in short, these stories reflect the children's own reality! Probably the only stories of this kind they will come across. Valentino has given the children every reason to want to read their Grammar Books.

While younger children are taught entirely with Alice Project material, students use state board books after Grade 9 so they can get ready for the board exam system – a necessary compromise. Do they have a problem integrating back into the state board system after having been taught in such a different way? "On the contrary!" exclaims Valentino. "They (students from this school) see how other children struggle to understand concepts, and realise the difference in the way they were taught. Going

inside yourself gives you incredible power. There is light in these children's eyes. When there is light, you know there has been introspection. When there is no light, you know there is an alienation from one's own inner self. As teachers, our job is to turn on the light."

The Crumbling Village

What have the parents' responses been like, thus far? "We have a special method we use for socialization in kindergarten," explains Valentino, "and parents often think that the children are just playing and wasting time. We have asked the teachers to be very strict about this – if they do not trust our professionalism, then it is better that they take the child back and send them to another school." By and large, though, a lot of the parents are illiterate and don't have fixed notions of how things ought to be done in schools, and trust the school. "A large task that lies ahead is of educating the



parents while educating the children – but it is too much for us to take on right now,' admits Valentino.

"Fourteen years ago, when children came to school, they were so dirty, we needed to bathe them there first. You will not believe the living conditions in some of their homes." Abject poverty. Alcoholism. No food in the house, no place to keep their school books, nowhere to wash and dry their clothes. Some of the kids don't have a second set of clothes, and will wear a uniform till it is in tatters.

The school's headcount is now at 900 and rising. A handful of boys live on campus, but most of the boys and girls are from around Sarnath and Varanasi. When the school started, most of the children were first-generation learners in their family. This has been changing – and now almost 100% children in the area go through primary school. Valentino is pragmatic about how far-reaching the effect has been. In sixteen years, he has been the fibre of the rural landscape irrevocably alter.

The village where the school stands used be one of weavers. A hundred families were once involved with weaving handloom. Now, only one family carries on the tradition.

Many adults are jobless, some work as daily wage labourers, some as vendors of small objects and vegetable. "It is painful to see the indignity in their state."

"India," says Valentino circumspectly, 'didn't follow the Gandhian model of development, it chose to follow Nehru's vision instead. Nehru's wisdom came from the west, he thought that that (the socio-economic model he saw in the West) was development. The Nehruvian model chose big factories. The village is destroyed, their economy is destroyed, all the people that are working with the soil are destroyed. Lifestyles have altered, groundwater has been plundered, the water table has almost dry. Everyone wants a bore well in their backyard. The village well is full of rubbish." It is no longer just a sociological problem, it is also an ecological problem.

Valentino is convinced that it is this fragmented viewpoint and crumbling system of villages that has resulted in the kind of large-scale ecological and social problems that are facing Sarnath, and indeed, all of India.

"What is amazing is that a country like India will throw away everything it once knew and blindly follow the idiocy of the west. And you can see the damage infecting India faster than in other countries, and no one is talking about it."

This is not armchair criticism. Every effort has been made by the founders of the school to create an environment where contemporary thought works hand in hand with indigenous good sense; where wiser traditions are nurtured, while meaningless things are sifted out. Sudhakar Prasad, one of the first students to graduate from the school, summarises the culture at his alma mater as being a fortuitous 'Kaliyug mein Satyayug'. (Golden epoch in the midst of the dark age).

Invited by the Bhutan Government to a recent convention of educators, Valentino saw in our neighbours, a ray of hope. India, he feels, would do well to emulate Bhutan in one thing – their emphasis on GNH (Gross National Happiness) instead of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). "Parents want kids



'Ramjeet and His Stories' is one of the several context-specific textbooks and teaching resources that Valentino has created for the Alice Project Schools. The stories interweave existing social concerns and realities with moral tales.

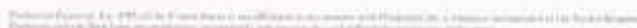
to be professional, successful, rich – "happy" rarely makes it to that list. You spend 20-odd years studying, storing mostly useless knowledge in your memory. And when you become old, lose your memory – what are you left with then?"

Valentino recounts what the vice chancellor of a nearby university once told him – In India, we had the key to solve the problem. And then we lost it. And now we are in a position where people from the outside need to remind us of what we had. The wisdom locked away in the myths and lore of this country is incredible. And instead of discarding them en masse, Valentino makes a strong case for turning this lore into our own personal White Rabbit as we journey our Wonderland. "Indian mythology says that the world rises from the dream of Vishnu. We are the dream of Vishnu. So, in a sense, it is from us that the world comes. We create the world we are! This is what we are trying to teach the children." It is as simple, and as impossibly difficult as that. ■



For more information about Alice Project schools, how to sponsor a child, and Valentino and Luigina's future work, visit: <http://www.aliceproject.org> Or write to v_giacomini@hotmail.com

THE 2011 PRAMERICA SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY AWARDS





RAISING THE BAR

THE TRUE MEASURE OF A SCHOOL OR TEACHING SYSTEM IS THE INTELLECTUAL ABILITY OF THE STUDENTS, NOT SWANKY FACILITIES AND ACRES OF LAND. HERE'S A PEEP INTO TODAY'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, AND WHAT NEEDS BE DONE TO RAISE THE EDUCATIONAL BAR.

Text: Shobhana Verghese
Photos: Mindfields

We need to raise the bar on the quality of education in schools. Frankly, the goal posts need to be shifted in many aspects; the basic teaching-learning dynamics, the examination formula, the codes of conduct for staff and pupils, the school's self-evaluation strategies, support systems like health and safety and in the generation of plain and simple courtesy... you will just need to step into the average school to see what I mean.

However, in order to achieve a rise in standards, we must first know where we stand in our fundamental work with pupils before we can hope to better the position effectively. What then essentially follows is an attempt to unravel the hype and reach the core. Going by the brochures and websites that so many of our schools put out for an innocent and vulnerable public, it would seem that each and every school is a veritable paradise that works exclusively to mould our children into paragons of virtue on the one hand, and exam performance purists on the other! Yet most information provided reveals a lack of understanding of what real quality in a school would 'look' like and often focus on cleverly taken photographs of buildings and buses, play areas, offices and labs along with lists of various exam results that seem to define what the school is.

The real quality of any school would be visible in the students who pass out after fourteen long and impressionable years spent within its walls. What is it about the way each school delivers the curriculum that defines what their pupils are able to do, with what they know and understand when they leave at the age of eighteen? As adults, will they be able to consistently think well, make sound decisions, solve problems creatively and manage change efficiently? Have they become lifelong learners? Ultimately, these are the questions to be answered in order to understand what real quality actually is before it can be raised.

And to begin to 'see' the reality, I invite every school leader to be the proverbial spider on classroom walls and observe the relentlessly teacher-centric practices unfold, lesson after lesson after lesson. Grade, subject or teachers make virtually no difference for there just isn't enough understanding of the learner-centric approach that puts pupils at the centre of all classroom dynamics. Sadly, in most schools, what passes for good learning is the achievement of high scores in questionably constructed tests and exams (Boards of Education are also culpable in this). And even more sadly, what passes for good classroom ambience is apparently well behaved pupils (silent in other words) being 'taught' by the teacher upfront, who is bent on completion of the 'portion' on time, administration of tests on time and production of scholastic reports to parents...also on time. Precision which all our grandfathers' clocks would have been very proud of indeed!

But what about the quality of learning achieved by pupils? On a daily basis, do they have regular and

consistent opportunity for the development of independent and/or creative thinking? Do the pupils interact with teachers as they extend and explore their understanding in different subjects e.g. is there enough opportunity given for independent application in challenging new problems in Math/Physics or sufficient scope for individual language output in composition? And of course, is lesson time managed well enough to provide space for pupils to think out-of-the box with the teachers only stimulating the process with meaningfully constructed exercises? No prizes for guessing how much teacher-talk our 'principal spiders' are likely to hear!

Or is it a largely teacher-dominated scenario where teachers explain while pupils listen passively? How well do they understand the different mental levels at which pupil-learning can take place and are they able to use varying instructional material to develop these mental abilities competently? 'Are the teachers able to gauge pupils' understanding [learning outcomes] properly at the end of each lesson so that progress is

HOW WELL CHILDREN THINK INDEPENDENTLY IS THE TRUEST BAROMETER OF HIGH QUALITY LEARNING AND INDICATIVE OF THE ESSENTIAL 'GOODNESS' OF ANY SCHOOL.

measured and problems remedied then and there? Does the school conduct regular and descriptive exam performance analyses so that trends in pupil achievement become visible, leading to the establishment of benchmarks which will further help teachers compare results and thus focus on need-based improvement activity? Put differently, wherever pupils are consistently and regularly 'thinking to learn' as well as 'learning to think' in everyday classrooms you will 'see and hear' really high quality



interaction. In fact, how well children can think independently is the truest barometer of high quality learning and indicative of the essential 'goodness' of any school.

Further, another yardstick that underpins the loudest claim to being a 'good' school is the holy cow of tests/marks. Well, what do these tests actually do? Do they mostly test rote learning? Or do they provide an adequate platform for pupils to demonstrate what they can do with what they know and understand?

In other words, do the test items reveal how well pupils have grasped concepts, and how well they can use this understanding in new situations that will require them to clearly demonstrate ability at the higher intellectual levels of analyses, application and even evaluation? And, is there an established mechanism for exam performance analyses to be fed back to both pupils and teachers i.e. do pupils get individual feedback about what they did well / didn't do well and the 'next



steps' they need to take towards achieving all learning goals; and equally, do teachers receive the same information to help them improve their instructional plans so that pupils benefit more deeply and with longer-lasting impact? There's much food for thought in this operational zone when one fights the good fight to raise standards.

Well, in my experience, raising the q-bar will necessarily require 'one giant leap' from the mostly teacher-centric approach to the pupil-centric one... for it's all about learning, isn't it?! Our classroom dynamics lie at the crux of the issue and unless we can simultaneously improve the quality of thinking and learning on-site and reduce the dominance of rote-learning, no amount of new paint on buildings and buses will raise the bar on standards of achievement. The world has moved on and today's need is not for the conveyor-belt production of walking knowledge banks, but for good thinkers, who have developed the right intellectual skills to think their way out of the box! We must move our collective steps forward with the rest of the world as our teachers morph into facilitators of learning for every type of pupil in the class,

ONLY CONTINUOUS, SYSTEMATIC AND WELL-PLANNED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR THE SUSTAINED DEVELOPMENT OF SKILFUL, INDEPENDENT THINKING BY PUPILS CAN LEAD TO GOOD LEARNING FOR LIFE

leaving behind the one-shoe-size-fits-all mechanics of the past. Only continuous, systematic and well-planned instructional strategies for the sustained development of skilful, independent thinking by pupils can lead to good learning for life, which will in turn send out school graduates of high quality capable of taking their place anywhere under the sun. The 'look' and 'feel' of good quality learning will be evident and obvious for all to 'see' and recognize in these young people...and the bar will have risen smartly!

Moving into this smart future is not meant for the faint-hearted principal. But determined and well informed school leaders who mean business can set the quality bar in rising mode with the following decisive steps which will first establish where they stand, and then indicate the improvement activity to be undertaken on a priority basis.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A PROCESS OF SELF-EVALUATION which uses simple, objective and transparent instruments of measurement e.g. short, simple questionnaires which help staff members to make accurate judgments about how they conduct their classroom work and what the quality of the outcome of their work is. These questionnaires can be easily understood by teachers and various other staff, can generate accurate information about how children learn in the school and can be administered without excessive interruption in the day-to-day operations e.g. teachers can use a tick-box type of instrument that has the critical aspects of the teaching-learning process listed on a 4-point rating scale to observe each other's

lessons, collate the results and thus establish the trends / patterns in classroom work in all the sections of the school. In doing so, teachers will be able to judge clearly not only what is going well but also what is not going well and where improvement is required.

EXTERNAL VALIDATION OF THE INTEGRITY OF THE SELF-EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS, the processes followed and the results that emerge. In other words, it is better to have all questionnaires developed by experienced professionals not on the school's staff – from various teachers' centres or certified education companies and/or experienced consultants, so that the validity and relevance of the items on these instruments will accurately and objectively obtain the information needed to assess the quality of work being done and also, from the results that are obtained, establish areas that need improvement and/or further development. Hence, when the quality of everyday lessons is being evaluated, the survey questions must pertain to all important areas in the teaching-learning cycle (e.g. the lesson objectives that focus all activity, the learning aids used to help different types of learners, the type of questions asked to stimulate thinking amongst pupils, the pupil-teacher interaction, the learning outcomes that emerge by the end of the lesson, homework etc), and not only to how well the children are managed by the teachers or the quality of blackboard work or charts on display.

PRIORITIZATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT NEEDS is another aspect that must be done carefully since these surveys will reveal many developmental needs in



different areas that cannot all be addressed simultaneously. These needs can range from implementing in-service training of teachers to help them adopt learner-centric practices, improving poor or inadequate infrastructure for curricular and co-curricular use, modernizing various systems in the school (e.g. the exam system, data management, transport etc) and hence, have to be planned for according to budgetary considerations, availability of resources, time and so on.

SETTING OF MEASURABLE AND VERIFIABLE

TARGETS and meaningful schedules to help achieve these improvements so that developmental goals like improving all teachers skills [e.g. learner-centric instructional strategies, computer literacy, questioning skills, continuous assessment norms]; the infrastructure [e.g. classroom apparatus, installation of multi-media apparatus, multi-purpose auditoria]; modernizing the systems [e.g. examination norms, information management, pupils' performance analyses etc] can be achieved in a phased manner with visible outcomes and within a definite time frame of three years.

THE QUALITY OF THEIR PUPILS' INTELLECTUAL ABILITY WILL BE THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING...NOT BUILDINGS, BUSES OR QUANTITIES OF NEW PAINT ALL AROUND!

DECENTRALIZATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

and identification of clear reporting/accounting norms to track progress is yet another aspect that must be planned since the principal alone cannot achieve all of the above on an individual basis. The school's development plan must allocate the responsibility of achieving targets in different areas to different senior staff in the school, who in turn will lead small focus groups/teams of people.

Under the overall direction of the principal, each team's leader will initiate the work involved and follow-up/monitor progress made by members of the team until the desired results are obtained e.g. if improvement is to be effected in areas like the continuous assessment pattern, teachers' skill in teaching to objectives, pupils' capacity to think independently, the co-curricular programme etc, teachers from across different sections of the school will form small teams, study the problems, plan the interventions required and implement them in a phased/planned manner over the course of a three-year period while the team leader guides, monitors, checks and supports the progress over the whole period. While the overall responsibility lies with the principal, all staff members need to take ownership over the process and be accountable for the results too, if the developmental goals are to be achieved on a sustainable basis.

EXTERNAL VALIDATION OF SUCCESSFUL

IMPROVEMENT or achievement of the goals must be corroborated with evidence of result as certified by external professionals e.g. a changed pattern of exam or installation of multi-media or the system of pupils'

performance analyses are all visible and their outcomes measurable, and hence, can be checked objectively. Additionally, if some of the developmental goals were not met, the school can be objectively helped to find the reasons for why they could not do so and address them properly.

If our school principals spearhead their school's evaluation and improvement plans with confidence born of honest processes and uncompromising objectivity, and also permit both, the process of improvement and the outcome of work to be scrutinized by external professionals, the q-bar will rise upward and goal posts shift forward. Their pupils will have developed sustainable, independent and creative thinking skills over the course of several years which will better guarantee life-long productivity and success...far more than all the achievement certificates, mark certificates, migration certificates and whatnot will ever be able to do. Hence, the quality of their pupils' intellectual ability will be the proof of the pudding...not buildings, buses or quantities of new paint all around!

Then, and only then, can school leaders proudly celebrate their schools 'goodness'. ■



SHOBANAVERGHESE

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You Can't Know Everything But you can Know well

Girish Ananth - biology teacher, ornithologist, polyglot - talks about the need to teach biology so that children can value life.

Text: Yasmine Claire
Photos courtesy: Girish Ananth

Girish Ananth rarely ventured out of the biology laboratory when he worked in the school I teach in. When he did, it was because he had spotted a rare bird in the campus and he wanted to take a closer look. Twice it was to rescue a Russel's viper who had unknowingly wandered into the lawn. Wildlife superhero adventures aside, he raised the standard of the biology department singlehandedly and left a lasting love for his subject in the minds of his students and many of his colleagues. Never one to restrict learning in narrow confines, he has also assisted students with challenging assignments in subject he has a particular fondness for like Psychology and German.

His wide ranging knowledge made him the perfect coordinator for the very challenging Theory Of Knowledge component of the International Baccalaureate curriculum. Students who have studied under him and the colleagues he has worked with have loved and admired him, both for his knowledge and for his compassionate nature.

I caught up with Girish to talk about his teaching, his causes and to know more about how he makes his subjects so wonderful and exciting for his students. He has taught in the Krishnamurthi Foundation, at Rishi Valley and The Valley School, Bangalore as well as international schools.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CAREER AS A TEACHER. WHAT HAVE YOU TAUGHT, HOW LONG HAVE YOU TAUGHT? WHERE HAVE YOU TAUGHT?

Well, I have taught for about 20 years now. I have mainly taught biology. In the sense that I have taught biology for all these years. In two of the schools where I've taught, I have taught German too. In one I taught German for four years and in another two years. I have also taught part of the syllabus for Environmental Sciences in one of these schools.

YOU ARE A MUCH LOVED TEACHER, TELL ME SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY YOU TEACH, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING DIFFERENTLY?

I don't think I can confirm that I am a much loved teacher. I will have to leave that to my students. But I can say that I have had this feeling of "security" (notice the quotes!) Whenever I was with the students, in most of the schools I have taught. I noticed this feeling in myself when I would be supervising the students during a test given by some other teacher or when I was in a "non teaching situation" with the students whom I would otherwise teach.

They would call me to their desks and would ask me to sit with them and tell them about myself. I took this, unlike others in my profession, as an indication of wanting to know me as a person. I felt they were recognizing me as being something more than just a biology teaching machine.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE BIOLOGY EXCITING TO A MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT? HOW CAN WE MOVE AWAY FROM IT JUST BEING ABOUT COPYING AND LABELING DIAGRAMS FROM A BOOK/BOARD?

The only reason I studied biology was because of my "unbearable" love for my animals, plants and nature. I say unbearable, because others often found this to be a quality in me they

could not bear and also because it posed, and still poses, a problem to me. If there is any absolute moral I hold dear, it is related to consideration to animals. And any event or social custom which contracted this one and only absolute moral in me, would cause me hours of anguish and conflict. At my time it was essential that a biology student learns the "art" of dissection. Now this was contradictory to my morals, but unfortunately I had to comply with the rules of boards and universities. So dissect animals I did and I hated every minute of it.

One of my aims in life was to see a day when I could convey to students like myself, the beauty of life by watching live animals, the living animal, as it were. This could have been the starting point for my having chosen to teach biology. As time passed, though we have a much less environmentally friendly culture, with our increase in consumerism, there did develop a sense of awareness about using animals in dissections.

And there have been colleagues who supported my opinion on this. It is actually possible to teach biology today, using observations of animals in nature, like watching live birds, small mammals like squirrels and insects.

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I have always tried to bring take children to nature instead of bringing nature to the classroom and I think my efforts have borne fruit. I have found that children like that better. They have that extra energy which adults don't and they like to go to where nature is instead of having nature brought to them.



THESE DAYS SCHOOLS HAVE DETAILED LESSON PLANS, SMART BOARDS, WI-FI AND OTHER TECHNOLOGY ENABLING TEACHING AIDS, SO HAS TEACHING BECOME FORMULA BASED, A FORMULA THAT ANYONE CAN APPLY AND USE?

You hit the nail on the head. They have got it all wrong. It's true that dissection can be taught by the computer and I thank the savants of the "techie world" for making that possible. But that doesn't mean smart boards, wi-fi, and other technology can replace sound teaching.

I don't think we can "make more Einsteins or C.V Ramans" with these

lesson plans and smart technology and the other jargon which goes with it. The best generals in the army have been those who have come climbed from the lowermost ranks. So teaching has to do with two things: you must love your subject and you must love children. And both these loves are unconditional. You must not consider



your subject as stepping stone to success. You may be a wizard or a savant in your field but if you use it for pure monetary gain then you are a mercenary and children don't like mercenaries. They sense when you are teaching to "make money", like many of the modern day gurus who run tuition classes. The other thing they don't like is using them as stepping stones to success. We need to accept children as they are and we shouldn't be bending over backwards to push

HOW DO SPECIMENS OF ANIMALS AND HUMAN ORGANS SO COMMONLY FOUND IN BIO LABS HELP A STUDENT OF BIOLOGY?

They don't! Is it not pathetic that children should think that the only way to learn about an animal or plant is to kill it? I am okay with human skeletons especially if they can be borrowed from the bio lab for visual effect in a drama class! But I think we need to draw a line there. Its okay to collect specimens

TODAY THE "MEDICAL SCHOOL" GOAL HAS BEEN REPLACED BY CHILDREN WHO DREAM OF BEING "BIOTECHNOLOGISTS". THE ADDITION OF THE SUFFIX TECHNOLOGY TO BIOLOGY SEEMS TO HAVE GIVEN IT THE CHARM IT LACKS! WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO PLAY AROUND WITH GENES AND CREATE NEW FORMS OF LIFE, WHEN WE ARE NOT ABLE TO PRESERVE THE EXISTING GENE POOL?

them through their exams so that we can advertise our capacity-as if the only reason they got through their boards was because of us.

You need to teach your subject because you love it and you need to teach the child to love something that you love. Children love to know what you love and they love to learn to love what you love. That's how you transfer love.

Teaching is communicating love for something. Like that Poet teacher in the movie "Dead poets Society". Everything else, technology and teaching plans and all the rest of the jargon is irrelevant-totally. I suppose in a cold consumer oriented society, these things have taken precedence.

from a beach if they already dead. Like seashells or corals.

But presenting dead animal specimens and organs in a class is more like "necrology"-the science of dead things. I don't deny they do fascinate some children and attract them to the lab but more often than not they have the wrong effect-creating the desire to kill and animal to observe it from close quarters.

DO YOU FEEL THAT BIOLOGY IS TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS ONLY WITH THE OBJECTIVE OF SCORING HIGH MARKS AND PREPARING FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL? WHAT PLACE DOES BIOLOGY HAVE IN EDUCATION?

Somehow teaching and learning biology has never had the right place it

should have in society. Rarely do students learn biology for the love of it. They study it only because they have to go to go medical school or because it is the only science they can cope with, since it is a non-mathematical science.

Today the "medical school" goal has been replaced by children who dream of being "biotechnologists". The addition of the suffix technology to biology seems to have given it the charm it lacks! Why would you want to play around with genes and create new forms of life, when we are not able to preserve the existing gene pool?

Is it not more important to preserve the multitudes of animals and plants threatened by environmental degradation and in the process make the earth a better place for our children? Why biotechnology, why? Yes, to prevent disease and to cure diseases. But why on earth should we create a generation of young scientists who want to manipulate genes to create 'new' varieties of plants and animals? I think there is a limit to satisfying our greed. We really need to teach biology to children so that they can appreciate and value life.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PASSION FOR BIRD-WATCHING?

This is the most difficult question of all, simply because it is so personal in a sense. Perhaps it was just destined. I remember, a long time ago, before I started bird-watching formally, and this is a real coincidence, somebody took a photograph of me watching birds (in a cage) when I was in nursery school. And captioned it "the birdwatcher". So maybe it was one of those self fulfilling prophecies, which you as psychologist know more about!

Well, when I was 10 years old in Dehra Dun, I and my parents found a sparrow in a terrible condition. Its bill was bleeding and it we were sure it would die. Probably an urchin's



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Well, when I was 10 years old in Dehra Dun, I and my parents found a sparrow in a terrible condition. Its bill was bleeding and it was sure it would die. Probably an urchin's

catapult or more probably a sparrow. But we took it home and it died mercifully the next day under our care.

The incident had a deep impression on my mind. At around the same time, while in the same house, I once saw our landlord, who had a leechi orchard, walking with a dead parrot in his hand. He would take regular rounds and shoot the parrots which would raid his leechi orchard. I felt more sorry the parrots than him and I resented his shooting the birds. I suppose the empathy with birds started then. But it really came on when I was twelve years old in Delhi.

HOW CAN SCHOOL CHILDREN HELP PROTECT BIRD HABITATS?

Another difficult question because it all depends on the situation. I think society as a whole needs to leave nature to itself instead of manipulating it.

It has always saddened me to see schools spending so much money on having palatial extraordinarily pruned gardens when all they have to do is leave a part of the school campus to itself. It's good for a proportion of the school campus to have trees and bushes which just grow wildly. Gardens are nice but they are often the most disturbed habitats which don't allow birds and other animals to breed in peace.

HOW WILL YOU HELP A COMPUTER ADDICTED, APARTMENT LIVING CHILD CONNECT WITH NATURE?

Advise the parents, educate the parents. They must be technologically literate but not emotionally!

YOU ALSO SPEAK GERMAN FLUENTLY, YOU TEACH IT AND NOW YOU ARE LEARNING FRENCH, HOW DID A BIO TEACHER WANT TO DO THAT?

I find language extraordinarily interesting. Sound has always fascinated me. Whether it is sound in music, the sound of a bird or the language we speak. Every new

language that I hear fascinates me. Come to think of it the variety in bird calls presents an equally interesting

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evolutionary problem. It's all about how we use the vocal cords. I find that fascinating.

AND TO FOLLOW FROM THE ABOVE QUESTION, DO YOU FEEL THAT TEACHERS TEND TO RIGIDLY STICK TO THEIR SUBJECT AND RESIST MOVING BEYOND ITS BOUNDARIES? CAN, LET'S SAY, A HISTORY TEACHER ASPIRE TO TEACH PHYSICS?

Yes, there is so much of stereotyping in the teaching learning situation. Despite my "talent" and "flair" (note the quotes, I speak with a certain amount of modesty!), I have rarely found other staff, colleagues or senior staff encouraging. Your proficiency in another field becomes evident only when one of your colleagues falls sick or leaves the school, leaving the children without work and a period not filled in with suitable staff. That is the only situation when the advantage of multitasking is acknowledged. In the teaching learning situation there is something which encourages stereotyping.

Someone is a strict teacher, somebody else is good physics teacher but not a very good mathematics teacher. So I am a good biology teacher. Is it at all possible for a good biology teacher to teach German or teach French? No way!

The school is a stereotyped environment. A child is good at language, not in science. One child is rude, the other is polite. We fail to realize that human beings are dynamic

systems with changing personalities and with varied interests. The present school system compartmentalizes,

classifies and labels. We simply talk about multitasking and ironically those who talk the most about this are more often than not, not capable of perceiving talent in others.

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT EDUCATION?

Time we made the system more humane to teachers and students alike. We need to delink it from social constraints. Of course schooling is a socializing process and should remain so. But teachers and students need not be slaves to social constraints.

Teachers should be free to teach without the constraints of completing syllabi or producing results in the form of marks. Teachers should be evaluated by how well they teach not only in terms of the students' results, but also in terms of how well they motivate students to learn. And how well students learn is more important than how much. Because you can never know everything. But you can know well. ■



YASMINECLAIRE

Teacher and strategist which works very hard to feed very large army of cats. Some day will write a sequel to 75 Dail's Old Person's Book of Practical Cats or if things don't go well, The Wasteland. Read about her cats and other animals at catsoftheglobe.blogspot.com



GALLI GALLI SIM SIM

AN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING INITIATIVE THAT PROMOTES COGNITIVE AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A LOCALLY PRODUCED TELEVISION SERIES BASED ON THE WORLD-RENOUNDED SESAME STREET AND A STRONG COMMUNITY OUTREACH INITIATIVE

Text: Ameena Batada | Mindfields Team
Photos: Sesame Workshop

Sesame Street' premiered on television in the US in 1969. Forty-one years later, the idea is taking root on the other side of the globe. As 'Galli Galli Sim Sim' (GGSS). Today, this highly popular show targets children ages 2 to 6 years, across all socio-economic classes in India. Each year, over 11 million children are reached through broadcasts on Pogo (mostly SEC A and B), and Cartoon Network and Pogo (mostly C, D, & E). GGSS is produced in Hindi and the first two seasons have been dubbed in English.



Considering that the media landscape in 21st century India is very different from that of the '60s' US, the show seems to have withstood the challenges of this age; slick media fare and fickle attention spans. The key perhaps is that, over the years, Sesame has learned along with its audience – about how children best learn, what excites and engages them most, and the salient issues and approaches for reaching young children – and has been willing to constantly adapt to remain relevant. It's not that the show is the same today as it was 40 years ago or that it fits every country. It is that Sesame has figured out how-to-figure-out-what-works-with-which-kids and

can convey the important educational messages of the day in an engaging and entertaining way.

THE CHARACTERS

The concept of using muppets to entertain and educate children is, indeed, a classic format that appeals to children the world over. Muppets are furry, lovable, and relatable – every child wants and needs

wiggles his brown unibrow. Boombah is the purple and pink muppet who is modeled after one of India's national symbols, the lion. Boombah is sensitive, loves dancing, and cares for his smaller Gallizens. Aanchoo is older than the rest and possesses magical powers that allow her and others to transport in and out of scenes and to change people's physical characteristics. Together

THE KEY PERHAPS IS THAT, OVER THE YEARS, SESAME HAS LEARNED ALONG WITH ITS AUDIENCE – ABOUT HOW CHILDREN BEST LEARN, WHAT EXCITES AND ENGAGES THEM MOST, AND THE SALIENT ISSUES AND APPROACHES FOR REACHING YOUNG CHILDREN – AND HAS BEEN WILLING TO CONSTANTLY ADAPT TO REMAIN RELEVANT.

friendslike Chamki, Boombah, Googly, or Aanchoo (the main characters in GGSS). The development of these muppet characters has been an important part of the evolution of GGSS. It was handled by Sesame Workshop and its production partners, Miditech and Turner Broadcaster. Chamki, the main character, is a boisterous 5-year-old who stands for education (thus the school uniform she often wears) and girl child empowerment (she also loves karate). Her age-mate and best friend is Googly, a blue muppet, who loves spaceships and cricket, and often gets bright ideas and

these characters complement each other physically and socio-emotionally as well. The "Galli" is ideally a place that brings children from all walks of life and all backgrounds together in a safe space.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In addition to the television show, Sesame Workshop also reaches out directly to their "mission" audience, which are children in underserved areas of India, through a widespread outreach initiative. This is mainly done through distribution of Galli Galli Sim Sim pre-school educational materials, in the form



A muppet at play with local children

of "kits", to balwadi and anganwadi teachers through over 20 NGO partners in six cities nationwide (Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad). Each kit contains innovative

implementing partner to conduct mobile community viewing (MCV) activities in urban slum areas. The activities are mainly focused on hygiene and nutrition and currently the MCV is running in Jaipur.

THIS YEAR, SESAME WORKSHOP IS ALREADY WORKING WITH OVER 20 NGOS ACROSS 6 CITIES AND WILL REACH ABOUT 2000 CENTRES AND WITH THE MAHARASHTRA ICDS IN MUMBAI AND WILL REACH 4,500 CENTRES, REACHING A TOTAL OF ALMOST 2,00,000 CHILDREN THIS YEAR.

teaching and learning materials that engage and inspire children and their caregivers. Each kit focuses primarily on a learning domain area (such as pre-literacy, math, science, health, etc.) and all kits are multi-disciplinary, building a wide range of knowledge and skills for children. Though the kits are designed to augment the core curricula of many of the centres, they are used frequently. Sesame Workshop also works with an

In 2010, the focus is to build partners' capacity to implement the GGSS program in their centres. To this end, the Workshop provides training to master trainers in their partner organizations and guides them in monitoring and supporting teachers in their use of GGSS materials. This year, Sesame Workshop is already working with over 20 NGOs across 6 cities and will reach about 2000 centres and with the Maharashtra ICDS in Mumbai and will reach 4,500 centres, reaching a total of almost 2,00,000 children this year. In each city, the organization has a project leader, who is on the Sesame staff, who works with each of the partners as they implement the program on the ground.

Sesame Workshop has received many positive responses from children, teachers, and our partners, who say that GGSS materials are more appealing and interactive than the materials available in their centres. Keeping in mind that the NGOs work in some of the most under-resourced urban areas of the country, it is not hard to imagine that GGSS materials would be something new and interesting, and ultimately would improve interest in learning and educational outcomes.

In one balwadi in Delhi, a centre uses one of the bioscopes, which



shows images from the television program along with songs from the episodes, on Mondays. According to the teachers there, attendance is highest on Mondays now because children expect the GGSS bioscope to be there. Even more grown-ups come to school so they too can take a peek at the bioscope. In Ahmedabad, balwadi teachers who learned about nutrition from the GGSS kit "Go! Grow! Glow!" now incorporate vegetables into their weekly kichdi, which they hadn't done before. And when they don't have enough vegetables, parents of the children at their centre contribute to the ingredients.

CONTENT DECISIONS

Content for GGSS was initially created in the form of a thick educational framework, which was the product of a comprehensive content seminar and several commissioned white papers. The content seminar is a hallmark of Sesame Workshop's model, it brings together experts in various fields like education, health and media to discuss the content issues to address and the specific knowledge and skills that should be the focus for the programs, both television and outreach. The content seminar deals with strictly





Getting acquainted with the characters.



CO-VIEWING/WATCHING OF GROWN-UPS WITH THEIR CHILDREN IS DEFINITELY ENCOURAGED. IN FACT, SOME OF THE HUMOUR IN THE SHOW IS MEANT TO APPEAL TO GROWN-UPS.

content issues but also other issues like portraying diversity, handling language, etc. Since there is no national curriculum for early childhood education, Sesame Workshop's content draws from several resources such as the NCERT framework, state and NGO curricula and monthly themes, and other existing models. In addition, people inside and

outside the organization are conferred with on the development of the content. This also undergoes a rigorous formative research process, starting with talking with children about the topics the organization is interested in addressing, to find out what they think and what their level of knowledge of it is. Formative research also includes testing draft

materials in "real-life" situations/conditions for appeal and comprehension. Based on the formative study findings, modifications are made to the educational kit or show. Sometimes, the teams have to return to field-tests repeatedly, before getting it right.

The US muppet counterparts of Chamki and Googly have dealt with matters ranging from basic skills like literacy and numeracy to science, hygiene, social skills, emotions and even real world problems (divorce, death, pregnancy, recession!). In addition, GGSS focuses on issues characteristic of the Indian context.

Over the years, some areas like hygiene and nutrition have got more screen time because of the large number of preventable diarrhoeal deaths and cases of malnutrition in India. Also, given the burden of a large population on limited land space, many of the episodes have focused on the physical environment and the role each one can play in taking care of it. The show endeavours to celebrate India's diverse cultural richness through implicit and explicit messaging in the episodes. Sesame Workshop seeks to create a safe space for learning for any child who is watching the show. As such, all of the programming models good behaviours and positive solutions while still tackling important and tough issues. The philosophy behind this brainchild is the maxim 'childhood should be childhood' and that children should have access to media that is age-appropriate, which is not the case in many places.

PARENTAL CO-VIEWING ENCOURAGED

The amount of time children and teenagers spend in front of the TV



Children using puppets at a camp organized by GGSS.



set/ computer monitor is considerable. Thus, Sesame Workshop provides educational programming on media, including television, but also on many other platforms, because children are viewing/using it. One of the main reasons for developing a children's television program in the United States in 1969 was to reach a mass audience using a medium that children were watching but where there was little that was developmentally appropriate for them. Similarly, today in India, there are no other indigenous educational television programs aimed at pre-school children. So, when children do watch (and they DO watch), Galli Galli Sim Sim provides a safe space for children to engage and learn amidst a sea of television shows with little

educational value beyond social relations,



SESAME WORKSHOP HAS RECEIVED MANY POSITIVE RESPONSES FROM CHILDREN, TEACHERS, AND OUR PARTNERS, WHO SAY THAT GGSS MATERIALS ARE MORE APPEALING AND INTERACTIVE THAN THE MATERIALS AVAILABLE IN THEIR CENTRES.

Co-viewing/watching of grown-ups with their children is definitely encouraged. In fact, some of the humour in the show is meant to appeal to grown-ups. Just as important as limiting screen time, is mediating it. Parents can help children understand media and its intents and limitations even at an early age, helping them develop critical viewing skills that will help them throughout their life.

As for classrooms, the television program is not being distributed to schools; only the print outreach materials. Of course, the popularity of the show is leveraged with materials that feature GGSS characters and, with some of the educational kits, A/V material from the show have been distributed. In the U.S. and in other parts of the world, where digital platforms are more accessible even to pre-schoolers, Sesame Workshop has offered various media. Again, however, the idea is to reach children with unique educational messaging on platforms they are

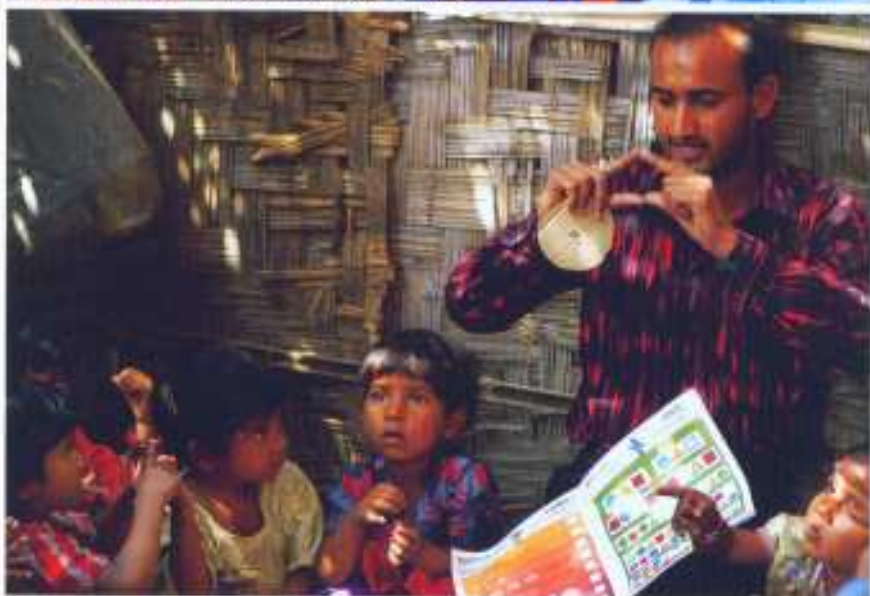
already using, that can and should be mediated by grown-ups, and that they are supplements to, not replacements for, the other joys in a young child's life - like object play, pretend play, or sport, for example.

THE FUTURE

The Sesame Workshop is interested in creating a sustainable program, wherein partners could procure the educational materials so there is no dependence on ongoing foundation support. It is also looking at mixing media and approaches for greater impact, including how material for and with community radio stations can be produced, using telephony to train and support teachers, and addressing more of the major issues faced by Indian children. For example, the Workshop has already been addressing major health problems of high rates of diarrheal diseases and malnutrition through the hygiene and nutrition programming and is looking at what other areas should be addressed for this age group.



LEARNING WITH CHAMKI AND SESAME WORKSHOP MATERIALS



THE APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING THAT ARE PROMOTED THROUGH THE KITS AND EVEN THROUGH THE TELEVISION SHOW ARE CHALLENGING WHAT IS TRADITIONALLY PRACTISED IN INDIA.

The organisation would also like to partner with the government in more states and to increase their activity in advocacy around early childhood education and development in India. (Most of the work to promote child-friendly media policies has taken place in the United States where Sesame Workshop has a long-standing permanent office. There, it has advocated for policies such as limits

on junk-food advertising to children and increases in the amount and quality of educational television programming.)

In India, Sesame Workshop has been part of improving the quality of early childhood education by providing innovative teaching-learning materials and including training on progressive approaches in early childhood education to

teachers. Sesame Workshop is also trying to get more involved with organizations such as the Center for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) at Ambedkar University in New Delhi.

The approaches to teaching and learning that are promoted through the kits and even through the television show are challenging what is traditionally practised in India.

From the television program, which is the only such program from and for India, to the outreach materials and programs, it strives to encourage teachers to think differently about how they teach, encourage parents to think differently about the purpose of *balwadi/anganwadi*, and inspire children to learn while having fun.

The Workshop wants to challenge the traditional notions about what education is and should be for young children. Quite often they are asked whether they have materials on "reading and writing" for pre-schools and they have to respond that they do not and that this is not what they believe early childhood education should include, and why. This is where GGSS comes in. ■



For more information on Gali Gali Sim Sim outreach activities, please mail them at info@sesameworkshopindia.org
website: <http://www.galigalissimsim.com>

MY STORIED CHILDHOOD



Pragya Alekar, a TED Fellow, is an international development consultant for developing countries. An engineer by training, she works with NGOs, government and private agencies to build sustainable water, sanitation and energy projects in urban and rural areas. She researches and blogs about innovative technology and business enterprises in these communities. She shares with Mindfields the experience of going through a gurukul-style schooling system.

I was four years and ten months old when I boarded my most important flight from the USA to India. I was going to school. I had a suitcase and a little backpack with my name on it. My parents couldn't afford to make the trip with me. So I was sent

than marrying upon graduation, she chose to work her dream job as a schoolteacher and augment her family's meager earnings. Although poor, she grew up in a very close and deeply spiritual family with a tremendous amount of love and affection. Years

founded a primary school, she was determined that her children should have the chance to study there.

My parents married late in life. By then both of them had lived very full lives. They had studied, traveled, worked, and lived very independent, successful lives; my father living his years past age 22 in the United States, and my mother in India. When they married over ten years later, it was consciously done with the intention of starting a family. It was into this loving environment that my sisters and I were born. We didn't have much, but we were loved deeply. It is a wonderful thing to be born into a family that truly wants and welcomes you, particularly girls. I've seen many families, educated ones too, who have children out of a sense of duty or by accident, and often do not welcome girl children. My parents welcomed each of us royally and inculcated a deep sense of value for who we were. My father played a significant role in raising us



Pragya Alekar (extreme left) with her schoolmates during her schooldays

with a group of family friends on their way to India, who would drop me off in Mumbai with my granduncle. From there he would see me off to school – a three-day journey away – where I would be for the next twelve years. I would see my parents only 4.5 months later.

The story of my going to school actually starts before this point with the story of my rather unconventional mother. The eldest of her siblings, she worked hard to put herself through college. Rather

later, when she finally decided to marry, she brought this ideology with her into her new family. During her school breaks, she would travel around the country visiting holy places. It was during one of these trips that she ended up in Puttaparthi, a little ashram located deep in the dry annals of the Rayalseema area in Andhra Pradesh. She had such a profound experience during that time that she decided to make the Swami there her guru or spiritual teacher. Later when he

MANY PEOPLE HAVE QUESTIONED MY PARENTS' SANITY AND CHILD-REARING METHODS, INCLUDING TURNING THEIR YOUNG KIDS OVER TO A "CRAZED SWAMI" FOR SO MANY YEARS. THERE ARE MANY THEORIES ABOUT HOW MUCH MY PARENTS TRAUMATIZED US, AND HOW THEY STUPIDLY TRADED A FREE, HIGH-CLASS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES FOR A CHEAP EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA.

and creating a safe, secure environment for his girls.

Although I was born and had lived in the United States of America until then, my parents were determined that their children be educated in India. A year earlier, I had seen my beloved sister take off for India in a similar fashion. On my parents' request, my sister had bravely decided to join the Sathya Sai School (then in Ooty, later moved to Puttaparthi). "It is going to be an experiment," they said. "Try it out for a year...if you don't like it, you can always come back home." That was good enough. And she went off. I don't know whether she liked it or not in the beginning, or even how hard it was for her to adjust. This was the early 1980's - a phone call was extremely expensive and you were rarely guaranteed a good quality line. So letters were how we communicated. What I do remember is seeing her four months later and then over the summer, when she wouldn't stop talking about school and her friends. It sounded magical. We were very close, and being separated from her that year had made me single-minded in my desire to join her. When my mother and I went to visit her during the winter break, I promptly climbed onto the principal's lap and explained to her why I had to join the school immediately. She was so impressed by my initiative that she took me in.

Many people have questioned my parents' sanity and child-rearing methods, including turning their young kids over to a "crazed Swami," for so many years. There are many theories about how much my parents traumatized us, and how they stupidly traded a free, high-class education in the United States for a cheap education in rural India. On all these counts, I ask people to meet my sisters, myself or any of the other kids who have been through this school system and decide for themselves how miserable or traumatized we are. In terms of the trauma, I can assure you that whatever we children went through was nothing compared to the pain my parents went



Pragya at a TED conference | Photo: whiteafican

through. Children generally adjust to everything very easily. However, I remember my mother sitting up many nights the first year my sister was gone, crying and praying, hoping that she had done the right thing in sending her child away like that. Having given up

LIFE AT THE SCHOOL WAS ONE OF ENFORCED SIMPLICITY. ONLY THE MOST BASIC AND IMPORTANT AMENITIES WERE ALLOWED, AND THEY WERE WITHOUT FRILLS. THE EDUCATION WAS FREE, SO AS TO ENSURE THAT ANY CHILD REGARDLESS OF THEIR BACKGROUND COULD BE EDUCATED IN THE SAME PLACE.

both her children the next year must only have worsened the pain. To their credit, despite all the pain, my parents never wavered in their commitment towards our growth and education. Twenty-five years later, the results speak for themselves. While it is up to society and my parents to judge how well we turned out, I feel deep gratitude for what those twelve years did for me. I am also very proud of my sisters, and am continually impressed by the quality of kids who come out of that system.

The Sathya Sai School system is built on an ancient system of Indian education, called the Gurukul. In the old days, young men, including princes, were sent away to the homes of great masters or gurus at the tender age of five. In these secluded places, often in the deep forest, they took the vows of brahmacharya that included celibacy, poverty, and obedience to their gurus, and spent the next several years training in everything from combat warfare to the sciences, arts, and music, and spirituality. Social hierarchies were done away with, and students humbly served together under their gurus. Only years later when they were young men and their gurus had deemed them worthy of the world, were they allowed to return home. Having lived humble lives with people from different social classes and backgrounds, the crown princes could relate to the lives of people across their kingdoms, and ruled fairly; and their trusted peers could communicate freely with them when they needed. Thus, the Gurukul system created peace and harmony between the rulers and society. Sathya Sai Baba, the Swami who built the system of education I went through, believed that our society that is so torn by racial, cultural, language, religious, and societal divides desperately needed an education system like this to bring it back into balance. Over the past forty-

five years, he has slowly and carefully built up an entire education system (that runs from primary school to postgraduate education) on this same premise, albeit with adjustments to accommodate today's world. For example, the school education is CBSE Board-certified; teachers follow the Union Grants Commission (UGC) standards, students go home at least twice a year to be with their families, and our uniforms, activities and training are inline with today's world. Yet there is a deep underlying current of the Gurukul system in there. Students operate under the vows of brahmacharya (celibacy, poverty, and obedience). Training is as much mental and spiritual, as it is academic. The schedules are strict and highly regimented; and social and sectoral egalitarianism is strictly observed. There are female and male students but they rarely interact, particularly after age twelve.

Life at the school was one of enforced

simplicity. Only the most basic and important amenities were allowed, and they were without frills. The education was free, so as to ensure that any child regardless of their background could be educated in the same place.

Each child coming into the school was allowed to bring a single, small suitcase in which all his/her worldly possessions had to fit. Luggage was searched on entry, and contraband items including any flashy or opulent clothing or jewelry was removed. No outside food was allowed. Each of us was given a mattress, a pillow, and an open shelf of about one half-cubic-meter for our use. That was the extent of our possessions. Nothing was hidden from the world. Our days started early with 3-4 AM cold water baths, followed by morning prayers or suprabhatam. As a child, running water and electricity were still major problems as they still are in many Indian villages. So we all had to find ways to collect, store and ration our water until the next time we could get water through our taps.

In many ways, our upbringing wasn't that different from a local village school,

age hearing and interacting with people of obscure lands and tongues, from every possible class of society, and we had interesting people visit us and give talks. It's hard explaining to people that although you grew up in a village with very little money, you learned how to play the bagpipes because some well-meaning Scotsman had donated a Scottish brass-band to the school, or that your graduation speaker was the President of India, or that you've watched a cricket match played by all the major cricket stars. Yet we had no television or computers, we had to use our own imaginations to entertain ourselves. Drama, debate, art and music were a regular part of our lives.

Further, we all had a lineup of chores that contributed to the school's administration. Starting in Class V, we started to have responsibilities that progressively increased, as we got older. Senior students became gradually more responsible for the welfare of their juniors and the school, such that by the

EACH CHILD COMING INTO THE SCHOOL WAS ALLOWED TO BRING A SINGLE, SMALL SUITCASE IN WHICH ALL HIS/HER WORLDLY POSSESSIONS HAD TO FIT. EACH OF US WAS GIVEN A MATTRESS, A PILLOW, AND AN OPEN SHELF OF ABOUT ONE HALF-CUBICMETER FOR OUR USE. THAT WAS THE EXTENT OF OUR POSSESSIONS. NOTHING WAS HIDDEN FROM THE WORLD.

yet it had the same standards as a catholic boarding school. Our day was a mix of prayer, board-certified schoolwork, and some playtime.

What was unique about the school wasn't the routine - it was the environment we were brought up in. From the age of 5, we were taught to meditate and sit still for extended hours. We were encouraged to spend most of the day in silence. Hymns from the various sacred texts of different religions were chanted regularly throughout the day (we were taught that all religions were the same). Religious holidays from all the major religions were celebrated with great pomp. Because the Swami is such a well-known figure, millions of people from around the world congregate in that small area all the time. So we grew up from a very young

time I graduated at age sixteen, guided by our dedicated teachers, my twenty-five classmates and I were largely responsible for the well-being of one thousand two hundred children ranging from ages five to seventeen.

Still, growing up in such a unique environment has its disadvantages. We still missed our parents and longed to be home. Our teachers weren't the best academicians; many of them were there out of devotion to the Swami and because they were willing to commit to the rigorous monk-like lifestyle demanded of our staff. Without any outside help, and competing against schools that had access to better resources, we had to rely on hard work and each other to bring our academic quality up to par. The highly regimented routine often got to be too much to deal

with, particularly when we became teenagers and longed to break away and explore the world. I also remember being hungry all the time, particularly once I hit puberty. Three square meals just did not fill me anymore. Most difficult of all was seeing a world pass by outside the gates of the school that you could not interact with. Sometimes

adults, had no idea how to parent us. They still treated us like children. Not finding peers however, proved to be a boon of sorts. What I couldn't find outside, I started to seek inside. Over time I learned to value my independence and values, and slowly found a way to cope with my environment. I also began to look

joined the military, drove buses and cleaned toilets, taught science to slum kids, became a paramedic, wore a suit and went to work in a skyscraper. I lived, worked and traveled extensively in four continents, using my wits and a whole lot of good luck and grace. I often made barely enough money to survive, but I was happy, which is more than anyone

NOT FINDING PEERS HOWEVER, PROVED TO BE A BOON OF SORTS. WHAT I COULDN'T FIND OUTSIDE, I STARTED TO SEEK INSIDE. OVER TIME I LEARNED TO VALUE MY INDEPENDENCE AND VALUES, AND SLOWLY FOUND A WAY TO COPE WITH MY ENVIRONMENT. I ALSO BEGAN TO LOOK BEYOND MY AGE GROUP FOR PEERS, AND SOUGHT OUT PEOPLE I WANTED TO EMULATE.

the most beautiful things were so near, and yet so far away. At the same time, I gained a tremendous amount of confidence there. Having been exposed to so much through the gates of the school, I longed to get out and explore the world, and finally fulfill the dreams I had built over the years.

But the hardest part was yet to come. Leaving school was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my teenage years. Suddenly, the family I had known for the majority of my life was gone. At sixteen, I found myself back in Los Angeles, with parents I didn't know well and a culture I was ill prepared to deal with. Everything was new to me. The first two years were the hardest. I had no friends and I could not make sense of my surroundings. The sheltered environment I had grown up in had reinforced habits such as honesty, modesty, trustworthiness, teamwork, etc. Yet the real world seemed to be consistently moving in the opposite direction. People weren't honest, modest or trustworthy, and we hadn't been taught how to deal with people like this. We had also grown up without a television or radio, so the popular culture that is such a big part of college life escaped me. The mounting frustrations caused me to be continually depressed because I couldn't relate to people in my peer group. We didn't drink, smoke, eat fast food, or date, all of which are stalwarts of American culture. What was worse was that my parents, who had lost us at five and gotten us back as

beyond my age group for peers, and sought out people I wanted to emulate. Until then a rather carefree child, I threw myself into studying the world around me as best I could. I talked to anyone who could give me sane advice on surviving. The best advice I often got was from older men and women in the senior centers where I volunteered. They had lived it all, and they told me the things they wished they had been told when they were kids. "Take risks while you are still young!" "Do something you love!" "Make good memories now, because that's all you will live on in your old age," they told me. And I listened.

At nineteen, I made one of the most important decisions of my life. I decided that I was an adult and I had to make my life count. I wasn't going to spend it doing things that didn't matter to me or speak to my heart. Moving forward (for as long as I could practically afford it) I would only do things that I truly believed in, and would find a way to survive on the little it gave me. This decision forced me to look past conventional jobs and paths in life. While my classmates rushed to sign up for jobs that provided stability and large incomes, I quietly set about fulfilling my checklist of dreams.

Over the next ten years, I had the best life education a twenty-something-year-old could ever want. My life in India had prepared me to survive anywhere and I pushed that training to the limit. I did every job imaginable;

can ask. My parents, at first angry and then baffled, somehow stayed thoroughly supportive. (Today they are proud of what I have done with my life.) In between my trips and bouts of whatever illness I had brought home, they took me in and got me up again. During a year-long trip through the slums and villages of India, I found my passion in life. I decided that I was going to dedicate my life to improving infrastructure (water, sanitation, and energy) in the developing world. With renewed vigor, I returned to the US to study under the best in the world. And I haven't looked back since. All of this started with an education that was rather unconventional, sometimes ridiculed and frustrating, but provided me with the best foundation to live my life well.

So here are my closing bits of wisdom. Have faith and dream big. You are capable of doing remarkable things if you put your mind to it. Show up in your own life and be responsible for it. Make your life count, because you are the only one who can. Follow your heart and your gut, though use your head when you need to. You will never go wrong. If you are ever successful, be a nice person. No one appreciates a mean person, however successful they might be. Practice gratitude. No one got to a point of success without lots of help. Be sincere. It is the quality that everyone looks most for in others but rarely talks about. And, as Gandhi said, be the change you wish to see in the world. ■



Anand Kapoor and Kusum Karnik



A sleepy, wet Aghane

A School Grows in Aghane

A couple's endeavour to work with adivasis in Maharashtra has resulted in two residential schools, and a tremendous amount of goodwill. Dhananjay Joshi had the chance to look into their world

Text and Photos: Dhananjay Joshi

Our car stopped on the side of the road to greet three travelers on a motorcycle. Anand Kapoor and I got down. He introduced me to the travelers, IIT students interning at the schools in Aghane, and their professor. We stood there in a little rain and talked about the work being done in Aghane, a small village three hours up from a town called Dimbhe in Maharashtra. The road was narrow but the vision exceeded horizons.

I had met Anand through an email he wrote to me after reading about my high school experiences. Since I was coming to Pune anyway, I had written that we must meet. Another friend of mine, Rajiv Tambe, who does a lot of work with children and parents in Mumbai, also accompanied me. We both had driven to Manchar, a town about 60 km from Pune, to

visit Anand and his equally dedicated wife, Kusum Karnik.

Anand and Kusum have devoted their life to working with adivasis in villages near Manchar. Their organization is called "Shashwat", and among its many activities benefitting the adivasis, it has established two residential schools for children - one for grades 1 to 4 and another for grades 5 through 12. I was looking forward to meeting the adivasi children at these schools.

Earlier, we had picked up Anand and had started the drive to Aghane. The road was mostly paved (the result of many years of maddeningly patient work with the government) but it took a long time. Grateful men would stop the car often, to greet Anand. "Because of you..." they kept saying. Anand would just smile, pat them on the shoulder, and say,

"Take care of yourself". We stop by to talk with one of Anand's workers at a quarry, where Shashwat is teaching adivasis the art of cultivating and growing fish. Their farm land having been submerged by the dam, fishing provides alternative livelihood to these fishermen. We move on.

We pass through a village bazaar - a weekly event. This is the only opportunity for villagers to gather supplies for the week. Men, women and small children carry little sacks on their shoulders and heads, and walk miles. They have smiles on their faces and determination in their hearts. It is the rainy season but that doesn't stop these hardy people. The car weaves through a small sea of faces and animals.

We reach Aghane eventually, and decide to visit the primary school. There are four classrooms and we



Children in class at one of the two residential schools set up by Shashwat



walk into one. It is the second grade classroom. The children are sitting on small chatais with somewhat tattered books and slates. I had learned like this myself when I was in the second grade. The children stand up with respect. I have taught in the U.S. and this show of respect overwhelms me. They knew we were coming. The teacher is teaching them a collection of new words. One student reads the word and the others repeat aloud. The first student finishes the collection of about twenty words. Eager hands shoot up and say, "Me next, me next!" I want to hide my rising tears.

Rajiv jumps up, goes to the front of the class and says, "Ok, it is my turn now." Rajiv has a huge collection of games he uses to teach Math to young children of varying ages. The game he uses is fascinating. He says, "I clap once and it is equal to ten. I snap once and it is equal to one. The game is this: recognize the number I am making!" The children are watching intently and waiting for the game to begin. Rajiv claps twice and snaps his fingers twice.

The sharp-looking child in front, concentrating intensely, raises his

hand. They have been taught not to speak until asked. Rajiv asks for the answer. He says, chest heaving with pride, "Twenty-two." No calculators needed! My daughter had made up many packets of

For readers who want to know more about Shashwat, write to them at:

Shashwat, Opposite Thorat Building,
Behind Market Yard, Marolli, District,
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candy wrapped in a bag tied with a colorful ribbon. I give a prize to the child and his eyes light up. Eventually, everyone gets a prize. We make sure of that. We visit all classrooms and play different games. The fourth grade classroom even gets a little lesson in long division from both Rajiv and me.

It was soon lunch time. There is "one" Adivasi woman making the lunch, consisting of chapattis, sabji and dal, for everyone. The children have all their belongings in a small trunk at the back of the classrooms. They run and grab a thali from their trunk and they are served lunch. I hear no complaints (No cries of "Can we go to McDonald's instead?"). We eat with Anand and the food tastes

heavenly. Rajiv says, "I don't want to go back. Can we stay here?" We return to some more time with the children. This time they ask us questions. They want to know where we came from and what we do. They want us to tell them a story. Rajiv obliges and tells them a ghost story. They giggle mightily. It was time for us to leave. They sing us a couple of poems they have learned. I sing with them, silently, remembering that I had also learned them once.

I recall what Kusumtai had said when we met. She had said, "It is more than what they are learning schoolwise; it is what gives them joy." I remember telling my own daughters to "find joy" in whatever they do. These children are engaged in doing just that. It is wonderful work.

We leave. I promise myself that I will one day return to stay... ■



DHYANAJAY JOSHI

is a teacher, statistician, meditator and poet who loves to read. He is an idealist and can only do one thing at a time thanks to the years of Zen Buddhist training. He has no plans beyond the present moment - the tag question is, how do things get done? He thanks his wife and daughters.

TED Ideas worth spreading

Choices that Overwhelm

Though all humans share a basic need and desire for choice, we don't all see choice in the same places or to the same extent. In reality, many choices are between things that are not that much different. At TEDGlobal 2010, American writer Sheena Iyengar explores the art of choosing.

Watch the whole talk on TED.com http://www.ted.com/talks/sheena_iyengar_on_the_art_of_choosing.html

On my first day in Kyoto, Japan, I went to a restaurant, and I ordered a cup of green tea with sugar. After a pause, the waiter said, "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I know," I said. "I'm aware of this custom. But I really like my tea sweet." In response, he gave me an even more courteous version of the same explanation. "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I understand," I said, "that the Japanese do not put sugar in their green tea. But I'd like to put some sugar in my green tea." Surprised by my insistence, the waiter took up the issue with the manager. Pretty soon, a lengthy discussion ensued, and finally the manager came over to me and said, "I am very sorry. We do not have sugar." Well, since I couldn't have my tea the way I wanted it, I ordered a cup of coffee, which the waiter brought over promptly. Resting on the saucer were two packets of sugar.

My failure to procure myself a cup of sweet, green tea was not due to a simple misunderstanding. This was due to a fundamental difference in our ideas about choice. From my American perspective, when a paying customer makes a reasonable request based on her preferences, she has every right to have that request met. The American way, to quote Burger King, is to "have it your way," because, as Starbucks says, "happiness is in your choices." But from the Japanese perspective, it's their duty to protect those who don't know any better - in this case, the ignorant *gaijin* - from making the wrong choice. Let's face it: the way I wanted my tea was inappropriate according to cultural standards, and they were doing their best to help me save face.

Americans tend to believe that they've reached some sort of pinnacle in the way they practice choice. They think

that choice as seen through the American lens best fulfills an innate and universal desire for choice in all humans. Unfortunately, these beliefs are based on assumptions that don't always hold true in many countries, in many cultures. At times they don't even hold true at America's own borders. I'd like to discuss some of these assumptions and the problems associated with them. As I do so, I hope you'll start thinking about some of your own assumptions and how they were shaped by your backgrounds.

First assumption: if a choice affects you, then you should be the one to make it. This is the only way to ensure that your preferences and interests will be most fully accounted for. It is essential for success. In America, the primary locus of choice is the individual. People must choose for themselves, sometimes sticking to their guns, regardless of what other people want or recommend. It's called "being true to yourself." But do all individuals benefit from taking such an approach to choice? Mark Lipper and I did a series of studies in which we sought the answer to this very question. In one study, which we ran in Japantown, San Francisco, we brought seven- to nine-year-old Anglo- and Asian-American children into the laboratory, and we divided them up into three groups.

The first group came in, and they were greeted by Miss Smith, who showed them six big piles of anagram puzzles. The kids got to choose which pile of anagrams they would like to do. And they even got to choose which marker they would write their answers with. When the second group of children came in, they were brought to the same room, shown the same anagrams, but this time Miss Smith told them which anagrams to do and which markers to write their answers with.

Now when the third group came in, they were told that their anagrams and their markers had been chosen by their mothers. In reality, the kids who were told what to do, whether by Miss Smith or their mothers, were actually given the very same activity, which their counterparts in the first group had freely chosen.

With this procedure, we were able to ensure that the kids across the three groups all did the same activity, making it easier for us to compare performance. Such small differences in the way we administered the activity yielded striking differences in how well they performed. Anglo-Americans, they did two and a half times more anagrams when they got to choose them, as compared to when it was chosen for them by Miss Smith or their mothers. It didn't matter who did the choosing, if the task was dictated by another, their performance suffered. In fact, some of the kids were visibly embarrassed when they were told that their mothers had been consulted. One girl named Mary said, "You asked my mother?"

In contrast, Asian-American children performed best when they believed their mothers had made the choice, second best when they chose for themselves, and least well when it had been chosen by Miss Smith. A girl named Natsumi even approached Miss Smith as she was leaving the room and tugged on her skirt and asked, "Could you please tell my mommy I did it just like she said?" The first-generation children were strongly influenced by their immigrant parents' approach to choice. For them, choice was not just a way of defining and asserting their individuality, but a way to create community and harmony by deferring to the choices of people whom they trusted and respected. If they had a concept of

being true to one's self, then that self, most likely, composed, not of an individual, but of a collective. Success was just as much about pleasing key figures as it was about satisfying one's own preferences. Or, you could say that the individual's preferences were shaped by the preferences of specific others.

The assumption then that we do best when the individual self chooses only holds when that self is clearly divided from others. When, in contrast, two or more individuals see their choices and their outcomes as intimately connected, then they may amplify one another's success by turning choosing into a collective act. To insist that they choose independently, might actually compromise both their performance and their relationships. Yet that is exactly what the American paradigm demands. It leaves little room for interdependence or an acknowledgment of individual fallibility. It requires that everyone treat choice as a private and self-defining act. People that have grown up in such a paradigm might find it motivating. But it is a mistake to assume that everyone thrives under the pressure of choosing alone.

The second assumption which informs the American view of choice goes something like this. The more choices you have, the more likely you are to make the best choice. Let's test this assumption by heading over to Eastern Europe. Here, I interviewed people who were residents of formerly communist countries, who had all faced the challenge of transitioning to a more democratic and capitalistic society. One of the most interesting revelations came not from an answer to a question, but from a simple gesture of hospitality. When the participants arrived for their interview I offered them a set of drinks, Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite - seven, to be exact.

During the very first session, which was run in Russia, one of the participants made a comment that really caught me off guard. "Oh, but it doesn't matter. It's all just soda. That's just one choice." I was so struck by this comment that from then on I started to offer all the participants those seven sodas. And I asked them, "How many choices are these?" Again and again, they perceived

these seven different sodas, not as seven choices, but as one choice: soda or no soda.

For Eastern Europeans, the sudden availability of all these consumer products on the marketplace was a deluge. They were flooded with choice before they could protest that they didn't know how to swim. When asked, "What words and images do you associate with choice?" Gregors from Warsaw said, "Ah, for me it is fear. You see, I am used to no choice." And Thomas, a young Polish man said, "I don't need twenty kinds of chewing gum. I don't mean to say that I want no choice, but many of these choices are quite artificial."

In reality, many choices are between things that are not that much different. The value of choice depends on our ability to perceive differences between the options. Though all humans share a basic need and desire for choice, we don't all see choice in the same places or to the same extent. When someone can't see how one choice is unlike another, or when there are too many choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and frustrating. Instead of making better choices, we become overwhelmed by choice, sometimes even afraid of it. Choice no longer offers opportunities, but imposes constraints. It's not a marker of liberation, but of suffocation by meaningless minutiae. In other words, choice can develop into the very opposite of everything it represents in America when it is thrust upon those who are insufficiently prepared for it. But it is not only other people in other places that are feeling the pressure of ever-increasing choice. Americans themselves are discovering that unlimited choice seems more attractive in theory than in practice.

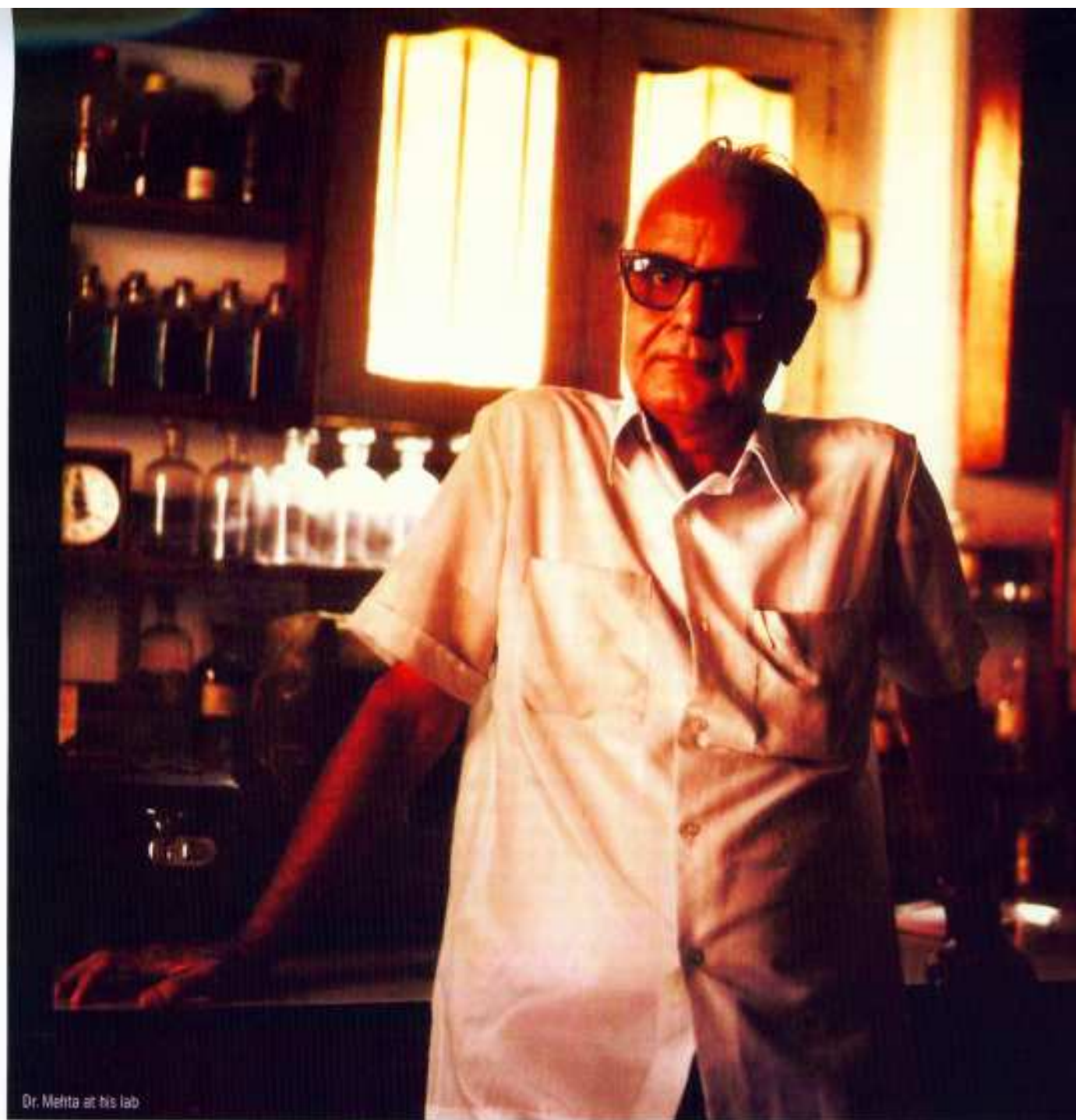
We all have physical, mental and emotional limitations that make it impossible for us to process every single choice we encounter, even in the grocery store, let alone over the course of our entire lives. A number of my studies have shown that when you give people 10 or more options when they're making a choice, they make poorer decisions, whether it be health care, investment, other critical areas. Yet still, many of us believe that we should make all our own choices and seek out even more of them.

In her essay, "The White Album," Joan Didion writes, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live in entirety by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ideas with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." The story Americans tell, the story upon which the American dream depends is the story of limitless choice. This narrative promises so much: freedom, happiness, success. It lays the world at your feet and says, "You can have anything, everything." It's a great story, and it's understandable why they would be reluctant to revise it. But when you take a close look, you start to see the holes, and you start to see that the story can be told in many other ways.

Americans have so often tried to disseminate their ideas of choice, believing that they will be, or ought to be, welcomed with open hearts and minds. But the history books and the daily news tell us it doesn't always work out that way. The phantasmagoria, the actual experience that we try to understand and organize through narrative, varies from place to place. No single narrative serves the needs of everyone everywhere. Moreover, Americans themselves could benefit from incorporating new perspectives into their own narrative, which has been driving their choices for so long.

No matter where we're from and what your narrative is, we all have a responsibility to open ourselves up to a wider array of what choice can do, and what it can represent. And this does not lead to a paralyzing moral relativism. Rather, it teaches us when and how to act. It brings us that much closer to realizing the full potential of choice, to inspiring the hope and achieving the freedom that choice promises but doesn't always deliver. If we learn to speak to one another, albeit through translation, then we can begin to see choice in all its strangeness, complexity and compelling beauty. ■

TED Ideas worth spreading



Dr. Mehta at his lab

THE ECLECTIC DOCTOR

Pathologist-playwright-author-social activist. Dr. Bhanu Shankar Mehta wears many epithets with élan and grace!

Text and Photos: Shagufa Bhudwai

activities of a curiously named literary club and religiously attends the musical mehfils (recitals) for which his city is renowned.

Then, as now, 89-year-old Dr. Bhanu Shankar Mehta of Varanasi has lived anything but a sterile medico's life. His careers and passions read like a comprehensive list of college subjects: History, Maths, Biology, Drama, Geography, and Literature. In each one he's excelled.

Born in 1921 in Jaunpur, Dr. Mehta's arrival into this world was marked by a '100-gun salute'. His grandfather, the Superintendent of Police of Jaunpur district, ensured that the festivities marking his first grandchild's birth befitted his own position as a 'Sahab'. I could not help but smile when this octogenarian clad in a crisp white dhoti-kurta adds softly, "But I have no resonance of guns in me!"

We sit surrounded by a vast sea of books as Dr. Mehta recounts his lifetime of explorations. My thoughts drift away from the imagined echo of 'a 100-gun salute' to the well-known names I see on the books' spines. It does not take long to figure out that Dr. Mehta spends most of his time in his study. He knows his sanctum well enough to fish out the right book each time he stretches out his hand.

Dr. Mehta's life story soon begins to unfold before me there in his study. I picture his father, an erudite school teacher who had moved from Junagarh to Banaras to pursue Sanskrit studies in his adolescence. As a fatherless boy, living in Junagarh, Manilal Vaccharajani saw an opportunity when Raja Munshi Madholal, a rich 'Seth' of Benaras announced a scholarship to deserving Indian boys who wished to pursue higher study. Manilal packed his bags



Dr. Mehta (right), age 9 with his younger brother.

and, like many other Gujarati compatriots of his time, set out to pursue opportunities in an unfamiliar territory. Finishing his Masters from the famous Sanskrit College and L.T from Allahabad University, Manilal Vaccharajani never returned back to Gujarat. He instead married the daughter of a 'Sahab', an I.P.S officer, and settled down in Banaras.

The Naagar Brahman community of Gujarat proudly distinguishes itself from other Brahman sub-castes. Naagars consider themselves progressive and endowed with artistic skill. Any Naagar would proudly tell you how the women in their community have equal rights as men. In true Naagar fashion, Manilal married the Kundan Kunwar, daughter of a 'Sipahi Naagar' (the soldier-Brahmans from Gujarat who were in the service of Raja Chhabilaram Farukhsiyar), in plain clothes and sans dowry. Class barriers are uncommon in the progressive world of Naagars. This marriage did not change Manilal's decision to teach in a high school, where he would later become the headmaster. Two contrasting worlds – an austere father's simple city house and the his maternal grandfather's lavish garden house – fused easily in the young Dr. Mehta's mind.

As Dr. Mehta recalls some impressions of his carefree early years in Banaras, I am reminded of just how much life in the city has changed. The sounds of generators, honking horns, and blaring televisions come in through the window, as I imagine the carefree days he describes, when

Imagine a day circa 1953. A reputed pathologist in an old, tradition-bound city sits patiently for hours in his laboratory, testing samples and writing reports. Once evening comes around he rushes to the 'City Dramatics Society,' where he changes his garb and takes on an altogether different role. The doctor also writes serious academic articles on topics stretching far beyond medicine, using over one hundred pseudonyms. He coordinates the



Dr. Bhanu Shankar Mehta and his group at the Nagri Nazak Mandali, Banaras

young boys longed to watch 'Ramleela' weeks before it began every fall (The Kashi-Ramnagar Ramleelas were and continue to be an extravaganza). This was a time when you could spend long hours munching peanuts and watching the river Ganga flow by, while precariously perched on the railway track of the Dufferin Bridge. The Banaras of Dr. Mehta's youth was free of plastic refuse and ubiquitous pollution. But life was not all footloose. The anti-British Sarkar movement was at an all-time high and our octogenarian, despite his middle-class upbringing, participated in it.

Dr. Mehta mentions that his grandfather, the man who earned the title of 'Sahab' during the Raj times, retired voluntarily from the police to serve the City Municipal Board in Varanasi. Despite his association with

the British, 'Sahab' one evening unfurled the Indian flag atop the Municipal Board Office. Dr. Mehta emphasizes, 'The people were not against the British, but against the system. We were not against the Goras or the White Race but against the discrimination. The freedom movement also brought with this an inner awakening; people began to question themselves about what freedom means to them personally and collectively as a nation.'

Following their seniors, young boys at Harishchandra High School, where Dr. Mehta studied, raised slogans like, 'Ek, Do... Laal Pagdi Phenk Do!' (Rhyming in Hindi as slogans do: 'One, Two... Discard your Red Turbans!'). In junior school, Dr. Mehta wore a round cap (signifying his position) but by the time he graduated to Class V, he threw his cap in a bonfire. Dr. Mehta remembers the sad day when he read in the newspapers about Bhagat Singh's death sentence. 'I could not, and did not eat,' he recounts. This inner exploration of freedom and its meaning continued with him till his college years in Lucknow, where he moved in 1940 to pursue higher education.

I am impatient to learn more about the next stage of his life in Lucknow, but Dr. Mehta does not wish to move on so quickly. He mulls over those years so long ago and starts speaking

about his grandmother, who was his first teacher. Learning from her was organic. She had songs for every occasion and would sing religious and secular songs throughout the day while doing her daily chores. Another influence was his neighbor, Dr. Shobha Ram who also edited 'Banaras Akhbar'. Dr. Shobha Ram's spacious haveli was a world apart from his own home. Together with the neighbourhood children, Dr. Mehta enacted famous roles at Dr. Ram's home, wrote simple scripts, designed costumes, and performed. 'This is what we understood from 'freedom'- To be able to express freely...' School teachers, including Videshwar Banerjee, Pt. Kamlakar Cahubey, Sanjiva Rao and Chandni Prasad were not teachers but gurus. Each of them added unique dimensions to their students' intellectual, artistic and spiritual journeys.

Determined to unravel the mysteries of human anatomy after high school, but unable to pass the qualifying exam, Dr. Mehta studied science at the under-graduate level but never lost his focus. He sat for the Medical School Exam after his under-graduation and moved on the next step of his journey. Seeing a satisfied look on my face after I scribble 'Medical School' on my notepad, he backtracks again.

I am getting used to his method. He wants to pay a humble tribute. Retracing his steps, Dr. Mehta starts to speak about a man, his teacher, whose name I instantly recognize: Dr. Birbal Sahni, the famous paleontologist who taught science to the undergraduates at Lucknow University. 'A thorough gentleman, Dr. Sahni was also a nationalist who did not mark us absent when we missed our class to participate in a protest against Vinobha Bhave's arrest.



Receiving the Dr. B.C. Roy National award from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi

He even congratulated us on the peaceful nature of our protest but when we requested him to repeat his lecture; he simply said that freedom also entailed sacrifice." Dr. Mehta's priceless possession is a certificate signed by Dr. Birbal Sahni declaring him a Bachelor of Science.

The Quit India movement coincided with the beginning of Dr. Mehta's Medical College studies, and amidst arrests and a tense atmosphere the 'Batch of 1947' began its classes as late as January 1943. Despite a rigorous study schedule, the students participated in the freedom movement in their own ways. 'We would hoist Indian flag atop the hostel buildings much to our teacher's annoyance.' Dr. Mehta was a good student and earned scholarships more than once during his medical college years but the college refused to promote him to M.D. The reason: indiscipline. Activities like hoisting the Indian flag, participation in protests, and open discussion on the freedom struggle earned him a bad reputation in the eyes of college authorities. 'I apprenticed under the laboratory in-charge for a year and returned back to Varanasi,' he says. 'I borrowed Rs. 10,000 and travelled down to Bombay, purchased laboratory material and set up a pathology laboratory in Independent India.' He received a formal degree in pathology almost a decade after starting his practice when he received a diploma in Clinical Pathology.

Marriage and children happened soon after medical college but Dr. Mehta's creative explorations continued in the form of writing stories and plays, editing newspapers and acting on stage. 'I moved from one genre to another, one medium to another in search of true expression.' Today, Dr. Mehta has to his name about 40 books and hundreds of articles written or translated. He spent some of his quality time nourishing, the 'Thalua Club' (literally meaning the Idlers Club). The Thalua Club was symbolic



of avant-garde expression in the field of literature and drama. For the club, Dr. Mehta organized seminars on theatre and acted, directed and even formally studied theatre. He presented programmes on the radio and lectured in person on cultural, medical and social issues.

Dr. Mehta went on to become a highly sought-after pathologist and practiced until 2004. He was actively associated with the Indian Medical Association, becoming its regional president and eventually was elected as a president of the All India Medical Association.

As a president of the A.I.M.A., he travelled to Japan where he spent time interacting with the locals. The other delegates went out shopping and sightseeing but Dr. Mehta documented his experiences and informal interviews with the Japanese. On his return back, he published his experiences as 'Yatra aur Yatra' along with Leena Mangaldas (of Shreyas Foundation, Ahmedabad) who wrote a similar account on China. 'These were pre-internet and cable television times. Any kind of account on an unknown corner was welcome by readers.'

Moving away from theatre to cultural studies was natural for Dr. Mehta. His

vast knowledge on the tradition and performative aspects of Ramleela was the stepping stone. Dr. Mehta wrote and lectured on this subject and conducted research into unexplored aspects of Banaras' rich cultural tradition. He put together the Banaras Gallery at Bharat Kala Bhavan, the University Museum at B.H.U. He is also credited with reviving an old and popular but forgotten festival (exclusive to 19th century Banaras), Burhva Mangal.

I ask him for his message to young people today. 'Honesty and hard work, he says, 'and to think out of the box. Going into the depth of your calling and passion is wonderful but to think out of the box and feel your calling along with hard work and honesty makes you yourself feel good.' It's a typical summer afternoon when I take his leave. A creaking ceiling fan cools the three lazing dogs, while Dr. Mehta fishes into his sea of books to read. ■



SHAGUFTA SIDDI

is a cultural historian, writer and educator. Leads weekly walks to heritage sites for the India Habitat Centre. Can generally be found in the narrow lanes leading to the oldest hotels in Delhi.



'real girls ask real questions'

Text and Illustrations: Mindfields and Studio Umbilical

An interview with Anjali Wason, author of *Body Talk*, a remarkable new handbook about sex and reproductive health, targeted at teenaged Indian girls.

Could you tell us about your own background and the journey that led to 'Body Talk'? Why did you feel compelled to write this book for teenaged Indian girls?

Indian girls, like any other girls in the world, have questions, curiosities and anxieties about their bodies, sex and sexuality. But until now, there was no comprehensive guide available to the young urban Indian woman who is interested in sex but ill-informed of the consequences, good and bad, of sexual activity. I wrote *Body Talk* to help address this need.

The book is in Q&A form - 'real girls ask real questions'. How did you go about gathering these questions - who was your audience, from what parts of India, from what socio-economic background? How did you go about arranging such

conversations?

I ran dozens of workshops in colleges in Delhi and Kolkata that centered on safe sex and self-empowerment. The workshops, usually made up of about 30 girls, were designed to create safe spaces for the participants so that they felt comfortable opening up about sex. However, half of these "trust-building" exercises weren't even necessary - the girls were anxious to talk and discuss and learn about themselves and one another. They had tons of questions, and their questions inspired me to start an anonymous Q&A session.

For this activity, all the girls were invited to write a question they had about sex, sexuality, their bodies, their parents, relationships, boys, girls—anything—on a slip of paper. And then they had to put this piece of paper into a box. I would then pick out random questions and try

and answer them for the whole class. This way, the girls would get the information they wanted without being singled out or feeling embarrassed.

These questions—which were reproduced in *Body Talk*—were vital to the development and creation of this book. They allowed me to gain a more nuanced and accurate understanding of what young women already knew and what they truly wanted to know. Without having interacted with girls in this way or received these questions, I don't think I could have written as useful or relevant of a book. I think I would have projected my own notions about sexuality onto these girls, and that wouldn't have served anybody.

In both Delhi and Kolkata, the girls I met were studying in

RECOMMENDED READING

Text: Aravinda A.

I AM THE CHEESE

by Robert Cormier
 Pantheon Books
 Pages 214 Paperback



This young adult novel made its first appearance in 1977, over 30 years ago. What makes it quite the story is the same sense of timelessness that great books have always carried. It's a supremely well-crafted novel that effortlessly weaves the present with the past – not an easy achievement, especially since the audience for the book is not an erudite adult.

The opening of the novel sets the readers off on the journey immediately:

I am riding the bicycle and I am on Route 31 in Monument, Massachusetts, and on my way to Rutterburg, Vermont, and I'm pedalling furiously because this is an old-fashioned bike, no speeds, no fenders, only the warped tires and the brakes that don't always work and the handlebars with cracked rubber grips to steer with. A plain bike – the kind my father rode as a kid years ago.

I love the beginning – the extra long-sentence followed by the much shorter one. It sets the mood for the rest of the book and draws you in for the ride without preamble. It soon follows that it is a windy day in cold, bleak Massachusetts, and the boy on his cycle, Adam Farmer, is setting off on a long journey. You almost know that something will happen – that he will not make it through, or he may make

it and end up disappointed by what he finds in his destination, or something else. And so you go along, not just for the ride but also because you feel compelled to keep him company.

Adam's narrative alternates with taped conversations between a male character and a therapist, also in the present tense. This character seems older and we don't know yet who he is. Flashbacks follow the conversation and we go back and forth with the stories even as the boy and his cycle continue forward on his journey. Are they the same or two people?

At the core of the book is the question of identity, and a quest for it. Cormier has placed it here not by chance but design. It's something adolescents grapple with and struggle to find, and so too in this book. The conversations with the therapist push the character to recesses in his memory in order to fill in the blanks. He starts stumbling on 'clues' and the picture starts to fill out. And while this journey seems to make some progress, Adam Farmer is pedalling away with quiet determination. Somehow they seem to be the same people, talking about the same people, and yet we don't know how that is possible for both the stories are running simultaneously.

Will Adam Farmer reach his destination and find what he needs? Will the character going through session after session of therapy fill in the blanks in his mind? Yes, they do.

I am the Cheese is not a book with a story that can be encapsulated in a paragraph or paraphrased in a few sentences to entice a reader. The reasons I recommend it are that it's undoubtedly a great book, definitely one that takes young adult audiences seriously and gives them a taste of literature. It's not a simple narrative on the woes and travails of a teenager and instead reveals what real craftsmanship is. Robert Cormier has pushed limits



and it's always exciting when a writer does that, and shows what can be made possible. There's a certain autumn chill to the story that shakes you, a journey that must end and secrets that will tumble out that will keep you hooked. Now, that's a book you must read!

THE WHITE GIRAFFE

by Lauren St John
 Dial
 Pages 192



I don't often pick books that feature animals – especially if it involves unpleasant situations for the animal. Ditto with movies. But maybe it's the African world of McCall Smith's *Precious Ramotswe* I fill these rainy evenings with that drew me to *The White Giraffe*. Also set in Africa, this one is a surprisingly well-etched debut novel.

It's the story of a young British girl, Martine, whose world turns topsy turvy after her parents' death. Even as she tries to cope with it comes the news that she has a maternal grandmother who lives on a game reserve in South Africa. And Martine is told that her grandmother will now be her caretaker. She leaves England for South Africa with much trepidation. It's a bit of a shock alright but Martine soon finds that despite the stiffness of her grandmother, the strangeness of the land and skies, and the heaviness in her heart, there's a part of her that knows she has come home.

It's not long before Martine hears of

whispers and stories of the legendary white giraffe. Before long, the two of them come face to face with each other. Against the backdrop of school, a seemingly distant grandmother and homework, Martine discovers her own love for the animals. Throw in Tendai, the Zulu tracker, Grace, his aunt with foresight, Alex Du Preez, the unlikeable game warden, Ben, the strange and quiet boy at school, and you have the twists and turns for the story to meander through.

What I especially enjoyed were the attention to detail, the vivid descriptions and the pace of the novel. The bond between Martine and the giraffe grows slowly, as it does in real life between man and animal. With animals, we have to earn their trust and once we have it, it's an unbelievable feeling. Lauren St John sketches it beautifully, with the confidence of one who has experienced that in her own life. And I like the book more for it.

SCAT

by Carl Hiaasen
Random House Children's Books
Pages 371



Florida-based journalist and crusader for the environment, Carl Hiaasen, hits the children's book market third time around with *Scat*. His tradition of pithy titles continues after the very interesting *Hoot* and *Flush*.

The story is once again set in Hiaasen's home turf, Florida. The protagonists, Nick and Marta are friends, students and astute amateur detectives, as it turns out. Their sour faced and difficult-to-please biology teacher, Mrs Starch, is missing after a field trip to Black Vine

Swamp. There is a fire and after the students were brought to safety, Mrs Starch returns to retrieve a student's inhaler. This act of bravery turns out to be rather foolish for she is not seen again. Nick and Marta refuse to buy the principal's excuse that she is away on a family emergency. They snoop around, like good sleuths, pick up a suspect in their classmate, Smoke, the quintessential misfit, and land into trouble soon enough. Along the course of the story, they learn that there is more to people than meets the eye, that appearances can be deceptive and well, that life is tough sometimes but people are tougher.

As with *Hoot* and *Flush*, here too, is an important lesson in ecology so finely woven in into a thrilling adventure. In fact, Hiaasen's books come under the genre of eco-thrillers. Calling himself "a concerned member of the human race", he never fails to integrate that passion of his into his books for young readers. Which is what makes them so special – not the mindless tripe one will read and forget. Instead, it's a book you can read, enjoy, ponder over and pass on to a friend.

Nick and Marta solve the mystery of the missing teacher in a plot that untangles to reveal plenty. All the loose ends are tied up and a happy ending follows. Mention must be made of the background story of Nick dealing with his father's injury in Iraq, his own tenacity and refusal to break down. It makes the story real while firmly placing it in today's times.

Scat like Hiaasen's other two books for young readers, is extremely contemporary and very relevant to this day and age. It's the kind of story where the writer almost seems to look around him and draw from what he sees. There are issues brewing, people struggling, wars and eco wars. But there's also the daily routine of school and terrifying teachers and field trips. When a writer comes along and tells a story where the two worlds can meet, as it does in reality, you get a book like this one. And as long as we have writers who manage that, I believe the novel, if nothing else, will not face the threat of extinction. ■



THE GOOD READING GUIDE

1. *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen (Ages 12+)
2. *The Case of the Missing Books* (The Mystery Library series by Carl Hiaasen) (Ages 12+)
3. *I am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier (Young Adult)
4. *Watershed* by Chris Wareham (Ages 12+)
5. *Just Listen* by Sarah Jensen (Ages 12+)
6. *How Angel Peterson Got His Name* by Gary Pastore (Ages 12+)
7. *Scat* by Carl Hiaasen (Ages 12+)
8. *My Captain Shows Me Stars* by Jennifer Chabrowski (Ages 9-12)
9. *McWilliam Shakespeare's Plays* by Maria Williams (Ages 9-12)
10. *Josh and Nora and the Emerald Dagger* by Warren Paret (Ages 9-12)
11. *The White Gull* by Lauren St John (Ages 9-12)
12. *Orion and the Yellow Cat* by Chris Raman (Ages 7-9)
13. *A Collection of Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories* (Ages 7-9)
14. *Warrior and the Snakes* by Alexander McCall Smith (Ages 7-9)
15. *Water Stories from Around the World* by various authors (Ages 7-12)
16. *Where's Wampan* by Armin Greder (Ages 7-12)
17. *The Green Peacock* by Satish Kulkarni (Ages 5-7)
18. *I can make 50 uses today* (The Cat in the Hat's Learning Library) (Ages 5-7)
19. *Martini the Buddha* by John Russell (Ages 5-7)
20. *Baker's Girl* by Beverly Foster & Mary Russell (Ages 5-7)



ARAVINDORA

Joined Hippocampus to be around books. Loves writing and tries to earn a living from it. Loves the company of dogs. Agrees completely with the anon. Zen master who said, "I never got lost because I don't know where I'm going."

CHILDREN & THE COMMONWEALTH GAMES

The law endowing on India's children the right to education (RTE) carried a date. So did the decision to host the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. For the vast numbers of out-of-school children of the city, the law has brought no change. When the schools reopen next week after the summer break, they will be no better prepared to receive and retain the thousands of children who have either never enrolled or were eliminated by the system. Nor will life at school be any more child-friendly for those who have got used to the cramped, often cruel, conditions of Delhi's municipal schools. The authorities have made no preparation for implementing the new law, which seeks to transform India's schools and end the apartheid that divides private from state-run schools.

Under RTE, all private schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas were supposed to offer one-fourth of their seats to children of the poor living in the vicinity. Some private schools of Delhi have done this following an earlier court order, and some have made a provision for an afternoon shift for the poor, which violates RTE. The Kendriya Vidyalayas have taken no steps whatsoever and the Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas, for which the Delhi government screens children at Class VI, are carrying on with this practice. This too violates RTE.

It can be justifiably argued that the scale of systemic changes the RTE demands would require a gestation period of more than the three months that have elapsed since its promulgation. Fair enough. But one cannot miss the contrast in the preparations made for implementing the RTE and the Commonwealth Games. The authorities have put in an extraordinary effort to stage the games in October. Quite literally, no stone in Delhi has been left unturned to make the event a historic achievement of national glory. The contrast between the apathy to RTE and anxiety for the Games reveals the official meaning of national pride. True, the Commonwealth Games are a one-time event whereas the RTE involves a vast, sustained effort. Both call for a massive investment in physical infrastructure. Preparations for implementing the RTE would mean judicious deployment of available resources and mobilisation of new ones. Neither process has begun. In the case of the Commonwealth Games, officials have gone overboard to squander a pumped-up emergency budget to dress up Delhi in time to stage them.

Not just the venues where the Games will be held and people will stay, but the city at large is

undergoing expensive plastic surgery. Roads and sidewalks are being dug up and redone. Wherever you look, piles of freshly purchased tiles waiting to replace the existing ones greet you. Parsimony is out; extravagance is in. All along Willingdon Crescent (now known after Mother Teresa), raised flowerbeds are being installed. For this, the beautiful and extensive sweep of well-maintained grass stretching from the Teen Murti House to the Lohia Hospital is being removed. Terraced flowerbeds and tiles will cover the stretch. Tiles seem to be the favourite among contractors and officials. Even the ones installed only last year are being replaced. The surroundings of India Gate are witnessing a similar relaying of perfectly acceptable sidewalks with garish cement tiles and sandstone curbs. The story of the Delhi University campus is probably the saddest. Here, an angular, tall rugby stadium now stands facing the old Vice-regal Lodge which was restored to its original architectural ambience only three years ago at an enormous expense. Hundreds of mature trees have been cut down to build an ugly parking lot. Access to it has been provided by destroying another park which, till now, marked the university's platinum jubilee.

No doubt the chaos will soon settle down. The glitter of the Games will erase the memory of all doubts and dilemmas. The city will go on, coping with its endemic problems such as chronic water shortage, air pollution and lack of sanitation. Both the manner and style in which the preparation for the Commonwealth Games have proceeded will exacerbate Delhi's problems. Let us take water shortage, for instance. All along the freshly tiled sidewalks, a strip has been left open for flower bushes. Who will water them after the Games? The dried-up beds will remind children going to school that sustainable development is a nice slogan and a topic to elaborate for marks. The bricked tree enclosures erected to welcome Queen Elizabeth a few years ago along her route soon became convenient garbage dumps. During the days ahead of U.S. President Bill Clinton's visit, a magistrate was sent around in a van to fine anyone throwing garbage on the street. Each time such a thing is done, we bring back to life the British stereotype of Indians as people who will starve and save for years in order to spend millions on a wedding night. It seems we have learnt no lesson whatsoever about the meaning of modernity as an exercise of reason and judgment for human goals. Had these been applied for the staging of the Commonwealth Games, it could have been planned differently, with austerity and warmth, to convey India's original

vision and priorities as a nation committed to equality and a new world order.

Schools are going to stay closed during the Games. When they reopen, sports will remain as inaccessible and exotic as they are now for the majority of children. Playtime will be cut in general, to make up for the closure during the Games. In schools which have the misfortune to be located in the vicinity of a stadium or practice grounds, life has been tough. In one such government school, the sports ground was used for storing cement, bricks and sand for developing a nearby Commonwealth practice field. The Games' contractor chopped down the volleyball poles and left the ground littered with rubbish. For a whole session, children could not play. The coming session promises no relief. This school was lucky to have a playground. Most schools in Delhi have none. And college students are only slightly better placed in this respect. Inspiring the young was apparently not intended to be an outcome of the Games. Like everyone else, children were expected to act as spectators of a five-star extravaganza.

The RTE represents the Republic's dream of recognising every child as an active learner and a national asset. The law assiduously lists the systemic conditions that must be met to realise this dream. These conditions include a room for every class, special classes for older children who were never enrolled, 1:30 teacher-pupil ratio, higher qualifications and in-service training for every teacher, and a child-friendly environment in schools. A lot of hard work should – and could – have been done to meet the RTE standards in Delhi's schools before April 1 when the law was to come into force. Now, after the summer break too, schools and teachers will be no better prepared to receive the tens of thousands of additional children the RTE intends to bring into the system. Nor will teachers have any clearer understanding of what it means to allow children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to study together.

Private schools will continue grooming children of the richer classes for elite roles. Not one school in Delhi has emulated the example of Sister Cyril's historic achievement of turning the Loreto school in Calcutta into an exemplar institution where children of the poor study with the rich. Many corporate houses have now entered into the business of running schools. Fitted with centralised air-conditioning and close-circuit television cameras, the schools are chilling symbols of India's new apartheid culture. Under this culture, the poor have

been thrown out to the margins of cities like Delhi. Their children are supposed to be content with the sub-human conditions which prevail in schools meant only for the poor. The RTE rejects this situation and seeks to transform it so that education becomes a means of accelerating social cohesion rather than conflict. The governments of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, among others, have declared that they do not have the funds to meet the RTE norms. The Delhi government might do the same. Never mind the tiles.

Krishna Kumar (The author is professor of education at Delhi University and a former director of NCERT. This article originally appeared in The Hindu)

RIGHT TO EDUCATION LIKELY TO BE WATERED DOWN

In what could end up diluting the Right to Education Act, the government is considering a crucial amendment whereby schools will not be required to admit all applicants and can screen and select most of the students who will gain entry.

The "admission-as-an entitlement" provision will be limited to only the poor children in the neighbourhood and seats for them will be pegged at 25%. Put simply, schools will continue to have the right to screen 75% of the admissions, in a major amendment that has been prompted by sustained lobbying by private schools. Public schools across the country were up in arms, insisting that the no-screening clause could seriously affect their quality.

Section 13 of RTE Act not only bans screening but also fixes a penalty of Rs 25,000 on a school for first contravention and Rs 50,000 for each subsequent contravention.

Schools as well as state governments are also agitated about the no-detention provision - which guarantees automatic promotion to the next class irrespective of a student's performance - in the law and are demanding a change.

Signalling a rethink, HRD minister Kapil Sibal said, "There are practical problems with no-screening. How will schools like Doon, Mayo, Modern and others give random admission to children? Therefore, I have suggested that while schools will not screen 25% of poor children in the neighbourhood who have to be taken, 75% will go through the screening system that the school already has in place."

That RTE is going through several amendments is only natural, given its ambitious intent and sweep. The first round of amendment in RTE is already with the parliamentary standing committee. Amendments

pertain to giving an advisory role to the School Management Committee in minority educational institutions and widening the scope of 'child with disability' so that it includes those suffering from autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation and other disabilities.

CENTRE UNVEILS RS 1,500-LAPTOP

"Our target is to bring it (the price) down to \$ 10 a piece and our research teams are engaged in that project. In the meanwhile, we have developed this low cost access-cum-computing device," Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal told reporters.

However, it might take another five/six months to actually make it available to students as issues relating to manufacture and distribution are yet to be sorted out.

"Our learners should get it in 2011 and the government will provide a 50 per cent subsidy per computer," the minister said.

The computer, developed by a research team comprising IIT professors and experts from IISc, does not have a hard disc and uses Linux. But it has every function, which a normal computer has, the minister claimed.

Elaborating the functions, Sibal said the device has support for video web conferencing facility, multimedia content viewer for example pdf, jpeg, zip, etc, and computing capabilities such as Open Office, SciLab and internet browsing with flash plug-in, JavaScript. It also has wireless communication for Audio/Video, Cloud computing option, remote device management capability, multi-media input output interface option.

"Since there is no hard disc, the computers have lesser memory, but one can use add-on memories. There are solar panels also with the computers," Sibal said.

The government has already launched the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT) to provide high quality high definition interactive video courses and e-content for various undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Under the NMEICT, connectivity is proposed to be provided to 504 universities and 25,000 colleges across the country. It is part of this mission that the government has come out with the low-cost computers.

WHEN TEACHERS BUNK SCHOOL - EDCIL STUDY

A recent survey conducted for the Human Resource Development (HRD) Ministry by the Educational

Consultants India Limited reveals that on an average, teachers of three big states - Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, in primary and upper primary schools are absent for 28 days during an academic year.

The figures are even more astounding if four hours of administrative work per week is accounted for, which adds another 35-36 days. As in UP, for a 214 day academic calendar, a teacher was absent in school for 57-58 days. Out of the 168 days academic calendar in AP, the survey reveals that teachers absconded school for 68-69 days while those in MP for 63-64 days out of 229.

Teachers spent some non-teaching days on duty outside school and necessary administrative work while some took off on the pretext of personal work. For personal reasons, teachers were absent for 17.6 days in AP, 13.5 days in MP and only 8.3 days in UP. The survey also reveals that AP is comparably more liberal than the other two states in case of casual leave.

The percentage of teachers coming late to school varied between 7% to 10% while those who left early varied between 1.5% to 5.9%. It was also observed that there are more number of female teachers than their male counterparts while not all teachers present in the school were literally involved in their work. While about 85% of teachers were present in school in MP, 76% in AP and 89% in UP, percentage of those found teaching was only 72% in UP, 76.4% in MP and 65.6% in AP.

Thus, about 28% teachers in the three states were not in classrooms for at least part of the day. The study also showed that teachers reported more working days in urban areas - 16 days more in AP and 10 days more in MP. Higher percentage of teachers in UP were found to be absent due to their duties in a different place.

However, an interesting finding reveals that the absence rate of teachers varied to their social group as well as their status i.e. regular or contract. The differences were small in case of social groups with maximum of five days between 'others' and 'Muslims' in AP, 3.8 days between 'others' and STs in MP and 3.3 days between Muslims and SCs in UP.

There was significant difference between regular and para-teachers on the issue of absence from schools. It was maximum in AP - 18 days - and minimum in MP of only two days. Strict service condition of para-teachers could be the reason behind it.

OUR TOXIC WORLD

Review by Hari Batti

Most of us don't like to think about the poisons that surround us. Oh sure, we may get worked up about radioactive material being sold in the scrap market. But the stuff that kills us slowly is somehow easier to ignore. As dirty as Delhi's air is, we have to breathe, after all. And even though we know that all kinds of toxic substances can be fatal, the ways in which they kill are typically not as easy to identify or understand as, say, a swift blow to the head with a blunt object.

No, toxics are not exciting; they do their damage over a long period of time, through complex chains of events and interactions. Because of this, they provoke both anxiety and boredom: a deadly combination for those trying to educate the public on the subject.

Toxic Link, a Delhi based NGO, has used a novel approach to confront this problem. Working with Sage Publications, they've come out with *Our Toxic World: A guide to hazardous substances in everyday life*. *Our Toxic World* is part informational text, part graphic novel. The narrative follows the Sachdeva family and other residents of Rohini East as they confront, in different ways, the toxins that surround us all. From air pollution to heavy metals, from household waste to industrial pollution, this book covers a lot of ground.

I read *Our Toxic World* in one sitting—it took just about two hours. It probably won't win the next Commonwealth Writers' Prize, but it held my interest throughout, which is quite an accomplishment, given the subject. And I learned a lot. Did you know that washing your vegetables thoroughly in running water is the best way to deal with the high level of contaminants they almost certainly contain? It's nice to know there are some things we can do that will help. I also learned that by the

year 2050, residential, commercial and institutional buildings are expected to account for up to 38 percent of global energy consumption. Investing in green buildings makes more and more sense.

Our Toxic World is organized into sections that cover broad topics. Most



OUR TOXIC WORLD
Project by Toxic Link
Script by Aniruddha
Sen Gupta
Illustrations by Priya
Kuriyan
Sage Publications
(2010)

include a short narrative, followed by some condensed informational text. Honestly, when I saw this book's subtitle, "a guide to hazardous substances in our everyday lives," I expected the stories in it to be...painful. Fortunately, I found Aniruddha Sen Gupta's script surprisingly effective. The stories make sense; the dialogue works. And the book is populated with a large cast of interesting characters. They include a government factory inspector, an environmental activist, a housewife, an architectural apprentice, and a high school student. We get cameo appearances from a thoughtful auto rickshaw driver, a clean cop, several waste pickers, and many others.

Part of what makes this book work as well as it does is Priya Kuriyan's art. Without the illustrations, *Our Toxic World* would be nowhere near as interesting or easy to understand as it is. I love the opening "City of Bones" sequence and the panels that show the widow of a construction worker remembering a visit with the Doctor who had treated her dying husband. "Dust had eaten him away, transforming him into itself." This is powerful stuff.

I attended the Delhi launch of *Our Toxic World* back in April. There was

some debate about whether the book could be used in schools, and about whether it would be helpful to students. I find myself agreeing with the people who said that it would work for children, if presented in the right way. As one woman said, none of us understand everything we read, but we can all learn a lot by reading challenging things anyway. That includes children.

I suspect that many children will find the illustrations simply irresistible. Though this book would probably be most effective for students 12 and up, my own ten year old read it on his own, just because he liked the pictures. Later, when I asked him about it, he admitted he'd skipped most of the "complicated stuff" and "just read the stories." But he volunteered several important things he'd learned, including three ways toxics can make kids sick (pesticides get into rivers and poison the fish people eat; children eat lead paint dust; and children suck on toys made out of poisonous stuff.).

And if that's not proof enough that this book can work with children, last night I overheard my sons debating the mosquito coil I offered: "No way, it's toxic!" said one.

"That's easy for you to say," said the other. "The mosquitoes don't bite you!" Yes, life confronts us with many difficult questions. *Our Toxic World* won't answer them all. But it will get you thinking!



HARIBATTI

Delhi-based HARI BATTI'S "GREEN LIGHT DHABA" is a blog that serves up fresh thinking about environment, politics and justice every Tuesday, Thursday and most Saturdays. According to Batti, "If we're not pissing somebody off, we're not doing our job." You can read the blog here: greenlightdhaba.blogspot.com




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MEDICINE. DENTISTRY. ALLIED HEALTH SCIENCE.

English medium universities. Some of them had gone to English-medium secondary schools, but not all of them. I suppose you could say they were from the middle class. Their parents owned businesses. Some worked as civil servants, while others worked as nurses or policemen. They were Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Most of them wanted to have a career as well as family, and most were extremely curious about their bodies and their sexualities.

What was your own learning during the research? What were the biggest/most interesting revelations? Are there some queries and concerns specific to the Indian context, or is it all universal?

Without doing this research, I would have written a very different book. I don't think I realized quite how sexually aware or active Indian college students are today. I was very pleased to learn that these women were fairly open-minded when it came to things like homosexuality and bisexuality. They had a fairly sophisticated knowledge of HIV and AIDS, but their knowledge about sexuality or other STDs ended there. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that middle class urban Indian women have a very unique sense of femininity and womanhood.

In today's urban Indian environment, a young woman sees no contradiction in caring about her physical appearance and also

striving to be empowered and independent. They felt that there was nothing irreconcilable about being a loving, devoted daughter and having a healthy sexual appetite. In my eyes, this is a very progressive form of feminism that is much less restrictive than the feminism of the ivory tower, in which there are



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too many prescriptions about what it means to be an empowered, independent woman.

The most daunting and disconcerting thing I found out during my research was that the horrifying statistics we read about about abuse are unfortunately true. I interacted with various young women who had experienced some form of sexual abuse, or who knew people who had been victimized.

Your tone of voice (in the book) is accessible, and firmly planted on the side of the young person. The segment on safe sex handles admirably the subject of buying condoms. It urges the bashful young person, who would rather engage in risky sexual behaviour than face up to the reproachful gaze of the person at the local pharmacy counter. How do you think parents and educators are going to respond to this approach? Is there something you wanted to say to them in the writing of this book?

Well, I hope they are open to the project! I understand if certain elements of the book are

challenging for certain audiences. I want to tell anybody who'll listen: let's be open about discussing sex. Keeping things bottled up or repressed leads to unhappiness and unhealthiness.

What do you think are the most major lacunae in the transmission of information about sex? Do you really think parents could play a definitive role (i.e., would the children give them access into that realm at all?), or is it a task better left to people closer in age to the teenagers' peer group, or websites such as www.scarleteen.com

Friends need to (and will) to talk to their friends, but it's essential that peer groups aren't spreading misinformation. For this reason, it's essential that young people receive information about sex on all fronts. Parents need to talk about sex with their children, and young people need to be informed about websites that contain accurate information. I don't think that there are enough Indian resources about sex--books and websites that contain information that has been created specifically for the Indian context. This is a major problem, and I hope that Body Talk will begin to plug this hole. ■



ANJALI WASAN

Anjali Wasan worked as a features correspondent at Tehnika and a lifestyle editor at Time Out Delhi. She has designed HIV prevention curricula for adolescents in Nepal and South Africa while working at Planned Parenthood. She studied anthropology and law at the London School of Economics and is currently a teacher of English at a public high school in New York City. Anjali spent three years researching and writing Body Talk.